

MIND MELD VII



Coca '92

MIND MELD VII

"If there is going to be a brave new world, our generation is going to have the hardest time living in it."

Gorkon
Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country



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DEDICATED

TO

THE GREAT BIRD OF THE GALAXY.....

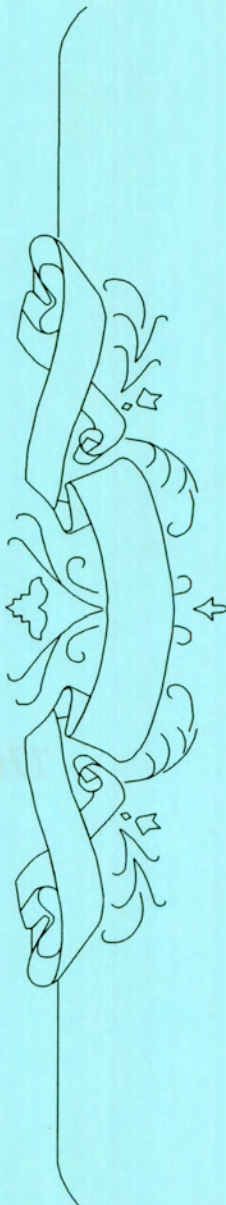


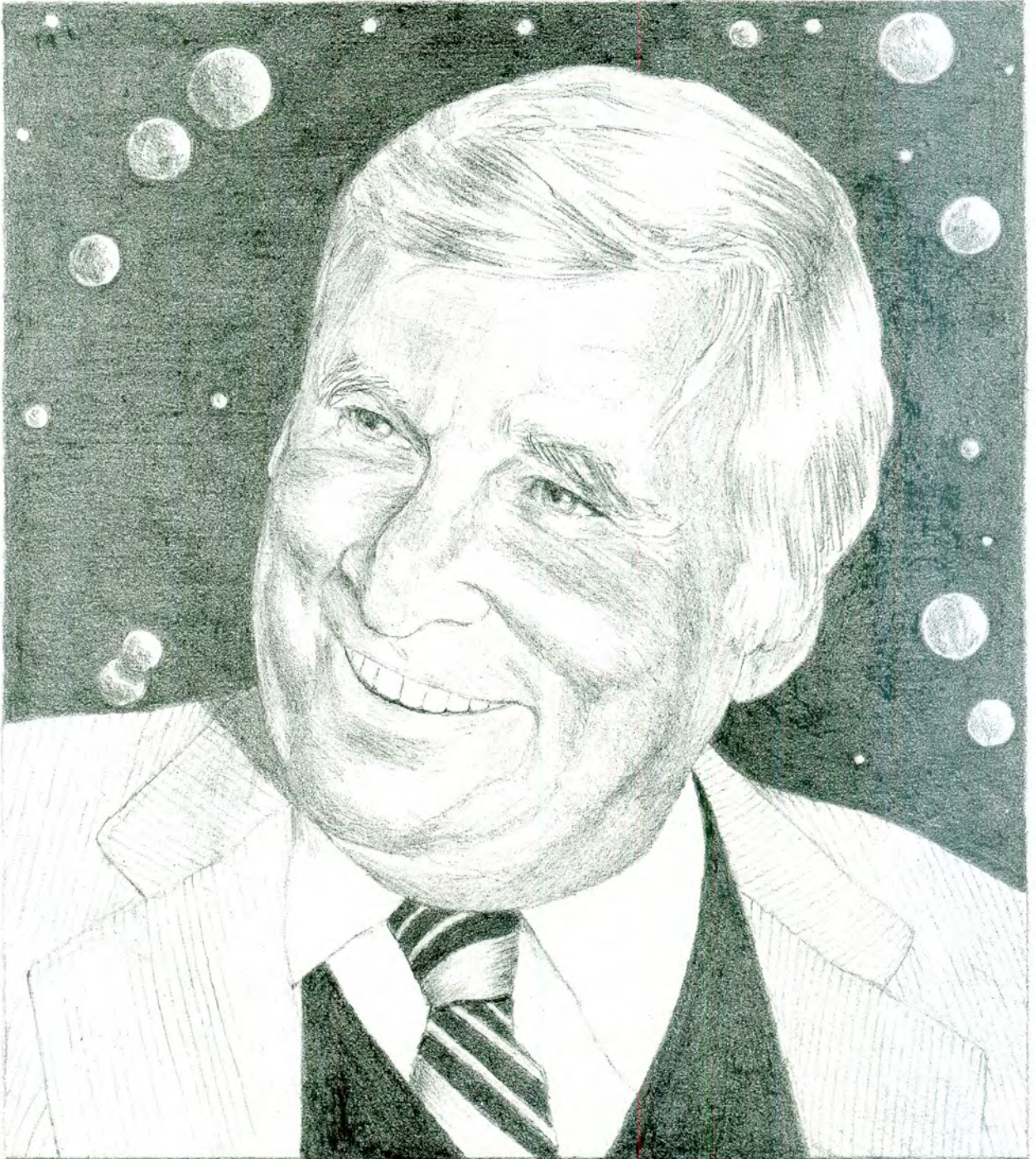
*Teacher, teacher,
We saw the future in your eyes.
We learned our lessons
At your feet.
We watched along with you
As your daydreams became reality.
And we reveled
At the courage of your vision.*

*Teacher, teacher.
From one generation to the next
We heard your message.
We looked into the mirror
You held tightly
To reflect the human condition.
We saw ourselves,
And we saw hope.
And we rejoiced
At the promise of tomorrow.*

*Teacher, teacher.
Your universe will live on,
And prosper.
We continue to believe.
We keep on learning.
And we miss you.
Our final lesson was one of grief.
How we mourned
At the passing of a legend.*

*Teacher, teacher.
You saw what was best in us
And then taught us to find it ourselves.
And in your memory
We continue with the search.*





GENE RODDENBERRY

1921 – 1991



FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

Murphy says that if anything can go wrong it will. Well, the preparation for this zine going to press is proof of that adage. First, it was supposed to come out at Shore Leave, in July. That didn't work because I was delayed with some editing due to a couple deaths and other things. Second, at the last minute, I had to get some last-minute pre-printing done. I thank Bob at American Speedy Printing for handling that for me. Third, I'm working two jobs, which doesn't allow a whole lot of time to do anything.

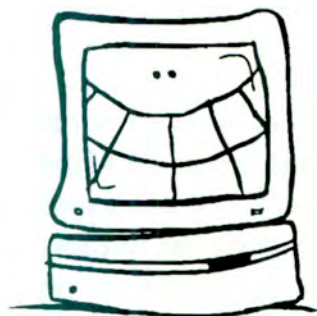
But here it is. And in one piece. I hope you enjoy this one as much as you have indicated that you've enjoyed the past issues of Mind Meld. I would like to make one note. There is one story in these pages that is not edited because I was unable to make contact with the author, aside from preliminary comments. Since I do not take *carte blanche* on editing unless I have the explicit permission of an author, the story is in here as written, with few minor edits.

Gene Roddenberry's death hit all of us hard. . . and in different ways. I only felt it proper to dedicate this issue of Mind Meld to him. The concept of the triad — Kirk, Spock and McCoy — was his idea of the *total* human being. And it is on the foundation of the triad that this zine is based. Our country, today, is undergoing some major changes. People are not happy with the "status quo" and are starting to voice themselves. When economic hardships get us down, we can thank Gene Roddenberry for creating a diversion that gives us hope that things **WILL** get better.

I have other thanks yous to add. First and foremost, the writers and artists whose work you see in these pages. If it were not for them, I could not have gotten this together. Second, Sue Keenan — she listens to more gripping from me the closer I get to press time — and she's **STILL** talking to me. Last, but surely not least, you — the readers. Without your support, there would not be a Mind Meld.

Well, I'm keeping this short and sweet this issue. (Plus I have to be at the printer's in less than 24 hours... <Grin>). I hope you enjoy and please, send me LoCs. That's the only way I can improve the zine. Assuming, of course, that I do another. At this point in time I cannot guarantee another issue of Mind Meld. Running a convention and editing a zine really doesn't mix well. I've been burning the candle at both ends and I really don't want either to suffer.

Now, onto what you really bought this for. Enjoy!



Qaplá,

Sandy

And now.....

"Second star to the right, and straight on 'til morning" ...

— From *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country*
and *Peter Pan*

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Dedication artwork by Chris Soto
Dedication poetry by Cheryl Zier

T'HY'LA

You said 'Thank you' and then turned away
And I felt again that thread
Which binds the two of us, strong yet unseen,
And leaves the rest unsaid.

You've seen me through my terrible times —
And I've seen you through yours;
But that was so, so long ago,
And I was afraid I'd find closed doors.

I left to hide myself from fear
Of feeling too much, too deep;
But no matter how very hard I tried
That link refused to sleep.

I did return, but cold, and dark —
And I saw it caused you pain.
It seemed that I had lost myself
But that bond helped keep me sane.

I found that what was past was not
And still that link we shared;
I gave of myself the very most
To insure that you were spared.

I touched another's mind with mine
With 'Remember' as the key —
And in that instant in time and space
The twosome became a three.

My last words to you, t'hy'la,
Were 'Admiral, do not mourn' —
You gave up much, your ship, your son,
And I returned, reborn.

When it seemed that things were darkest
And the seeds of despair were sown
I arrived to always remind you
You will never be alone.

You have been my friend, through 'thick and thin',
As you Terrans sometimes say;
And I have been and ever shall be yours
Beyond my dying day.

By Kelly Matthews

PERSONAL BEST

By Collette Mak

Art by Bev Zuk

"Never mind that! You keep up those thrusts." Dr. McCoy yelled into the intercom, coming to his feet in his intensity. Even by remote, he could hear the crunch of bone and cartilage, but damn it, he could fix broken bones, he could not fix brain death. *Jesus God, three down, one dead for sure.* Chee and Fivecoat had to keep that man's heart going until the crash team got there. "Just hang on, boy," he added in a belated attempt to be supportive.

Behind him boot heels were pounding in practiced patterns, getting gurneys, heaving equipment into place, careening into a line with the door and thundering towards the transporter room. "No, don't check on Spock! Keep up your counts!" *Spock. Oh Christ, don't let him be dead when they get there.*

"Team One beam down." Chapel's voice called from the outer room. "Deuce Team on the pads."

He could hear the transporter whine over the comm. "Okay, Chee, we've got medics beaming down, they'll take over in a minute. Just keep going." The emergency klaxons were still blasting, loud enough to wake the dead. *Dead, who was the fatality?* He grabbed the landing party report, feeling his armpits sticky with adrenalin pumped sweat. Spock down, but he had been bleeding. Bodies drain, they don't bleed; Fivecoat was working on her EMR, she'd know the difference. They were working on Kennedy. Lynn Lee. Wasn't she that little ice blonde down in engineering? No. Her record popped up on the screen, Security. Shit, now he knew, she was in last week for a pre-marital. Oh god. "Just keep going," he said again, this time to himself. Someone turned the klaxons off.



Pastel blurs with soft halos drifted across his field of vision. Spock felt his eye lids pull across the surface of his eyes, a slow process, a crusty feel. His tongue registered the metallic taste of ionized air — phaser burn. He had been hit before, his body knew what to do — find a hook to awareness and use it to bring yourself out of the fog. Sounds. After a moment the real world separated from the buzz in his head; human voices high pitched, frightened, efficient. Blood smell, iron blood, copper blood. Odd that he could smell his blood before he felt any pain. Even now he was only peripherally aware of a hole in his back. It registered more as a damp pressure than whatever it was.

His back, the blast had to have come from behind, he would have been thrown forward. Had he rolled? No, the ground felt level. His view, now that the blurs had edges, was of trees and sky. The landing party must have already examined him. Examined and left him; he was either dying or not in immediate danger. But someone was. He turned his head in the direction of the voices, his eyes closing involuntarily as the world spun and threatened to fade out. He expected it to be bad, he was right.

Lynn Lee was lying half on her side no more than two meters from him, phaser still clutched in her hand, parts of what had been an excellent mind spilled out on the grass. Slightly beyond her Chee and Fivecoat were working on Kennedy. Chee kneeling at the man's side, hands laced and compressing the burned chest at something like 80 beats a minute, and was shouting into his open communicator; Fivecoat had the man's head tipped back and was breathing into the slack mouth. Kennedy's body shook with each thrust, the hand that had held his phaser flapped at the end of his arm, barely attached by a few tendons and less skin. Despite the tourniquet, blood pushed out in rhythm with Fivecoat's efforts.

The air hummed with the sounds of the transporter, Fivecoat and Chee did not even look up. Booted legs rushed to him, past him, blocking his vision. The sound of a medcorder buzzed along with the insects, a hand touched his shoulder. "Sir, we need to get you on a stretcher. I'm sorry, we're going to have to move you." The wet ache in his back exploded.



Kirk was already prowling the corridor by the time McCoy hot footed it to the transporter room. He acknowledged his captain, but there was not any time for small talk. The first team was forming now, no, green blood, Deuce team.

"What have we got?"

They didn't bother to answer. Job one was get their collective ass off the pads—fast. The stand-by medical team surged forward like a wave, pulling McCoy and Kirk along in the undertow.

"Doctor?" God, Spock looked a mess.

"Later, Captain."

Kirk bristled, then—this is battle stations, all hands on deck. *You'd have Bone's butt in a grinder if he got in your way on the bridge.* He backed off as far as he thought he needed to, but not a centimeter more.

The team started calling instructions to each other in emergency room code, he would not have known if they were talking about a hangnail or an organ transplant. They looked intense as hell, but they always did. A laser sliced through the ruined tunic, someone pulled off the scraps and threw it to the side, a splatter of blood marking the arc of the toss. From between the tumble of arms and shoulders surrounding Spock, he caught glimpses of torn flesh and bone.

Positive thoughts, damn it. Well, Spock looked like a prop from a bad movie, but he wasn't bled white, that had to be a good sign. Kirk drew a breath and took in the smell of blood and transporter beams. Another team was materializing. This time there wasn't the rush, and only one attendant. Kirk strode over to help get the gurney off the platform. Lee, something wet and grayish was matted in her hair, and there

was another hunk of hair setting beside her head, looked like it was attached to a piece of — thick saliva collected in his mouth, he swallowed and stepped up, taking his end and doing his duty.

"Thank you, Sir." The nurse said, wrestling the gurney into line with the door. "They needed Martin to help with Kennedy." He looked up, saw his captain's face and pulled a sheet over the dead face. "I'll take it from here."

Kirk's nod of dismissal was given to no one in particular as an afterthought. The team was still clustered around Spock, but McCoy was off to the side, ripping off instructions to sickbay via the intercom. Shadows bloomed on the floor as the transporter brought Three team home. The forms shimmered into solidity, held still for a heartbeat, then charged across the room and down the corridor. He stared after them, then realized McCoy had been part of the stampede. The way clear now, Deuce team moved out, not as fast, but just as intent.

With the teams gone, it was quiet, but the acrid smells of emergency were still hanging in the air. A pile of soiled materials littered a corner, stained green. He thought he could smell vomit, felt sick himself. Little bits of memory were showing him Lee and Spock and Kennedy. It was pretty clear that Kennedy was the worst, the way that team had taken off, the way Medical had kept the corridor clear for him. God, Kennedy, he looked bad, looked dead. And that team, they had meant business, serious business. Kennedy. He loved landing party duty, what a way for him to learn about the dangers. Positive thoughts, damn it. Well, it would make him a better commander when he got there. Spock, his back was a wreck. How long till McCoy got him on his feet?

The security investigation team was moving in now, acknowledging the captain as they went about their grim job. The transporter hummed, taking them down, then hummed again as the captain of the Enterprise turned to greet the living remains of the landing party.



Consciousness came easier this time and it brought the smell of sickbay. He blinked the world into focus, a blue smear became a blue medical tunic. When he followed the tunic up he saw McCoy, and an expression of fury that he had long ago learned meant fatalities. "What happened?" the doctor asked, his attention more on the scanner's readings than on his patient. It was probably something humans said from habit, but Spock considered the question seriously and shook his head, trying to turn over. "Best don't move much yet," the scowl changed to something like a grin and a gentle hand pressed his shoulder back to the bed. "Bet you're sorry you did that."

"I don't know, I seem to — "

McCoy took a guess at what he had said and guessed right. "Don't worry about it, residual effects of phaser blast."

"Still?" There was something heavy bound around his arm, it felt tight. How long had he been unconscious?

"You've only been out a few minutes." McCoy turned to the side, checking on the surgical set-up. "I was just waiting for you to wake up so I could put you out — Chapel, get a move on."

It took a moment for the information to make sense. "Then Kennedy is dead."

"Yeah," McCoy looked away, to the side, at the floor. "Not a damn thing I could do for him. Or Lee."

"I know, I saw." He shifted position slightly, there was a pressure packet on his back and his shirt had been cut off, he was cold. "The captain?"

Another McCoy grin. "Wondered how long it would take you to notice. He's still talking to David Swangs, Lee's fiance, said to tell you he'd be here next time you woke up." The doctor picked up a hypo and adjusted the dial.

"No." If he had only been out a few minutes, there was still time to act, and something still needed to be done, he forced his thoughts past the cloud of chaos in his head. "Who's on security for investigation?"

"How the hell would I — " McCoy looked at his patient, debated with himself and turned to the outer room. "Fivecoat? Who'd they send down there?"

"Weston and Jones, I think."

"Fivecoat." Spock called, his voice was not strong, but strong enough. The woman appeared next to McCoy. Her tunic was blood soaked and stank of copper and iron. "Are you fit?"

"Fit, just filthy." She looked worriedly at the chief surgeon, he had a certain reputation.

"Good, get Voorheis down here, tell him I want — " What did he want? He could not remember the blast, or why anyone had fired.

The lieutenant seemed to understand, "I'll tell him, Sir. We'll give you detail and we'll get it fast."

"You're not giving him anything till I'm done with him." McCoy pressed the hypo home. "And I want to check you over as soon as you. . ."



There was not anything fancy about the surgery, it was basic trauma center stuff, the kind of thing they let residents practice on. Spock's body wanted to be in one piece, all he had to do was help it along. McCoy had guessed at it being a two hour job, it came in at one and half. Kirk had stuck his head in but had sense enough not expect a report in the middle of removing a chunk of phaser casing from a patient's laterals. By the time McCoy had cleaned up, Spock had come out from under the sedative, asked for Voorheis's report and fallen asleep before Henthorne could ask him to repeat the question — in English. McCoy chuckled, Spock was always so, well, Spocklike. He stood for a moment, watching the slow steady breaths of his patient and feeling satisfied that he had done a decent piece of work — not that anyone would ever get around to thanking him for it. Oh well, the hardest job was still ahead. That phaser blast was going to cause more problems than the shrapnel. Spock ought to come through it okay, but patients had a way of going sour on you, especially if you got cocky.

Got cocky, or you did a slop job on the post-op, like not making sure your patient got enough rest. Reaching 'round he scratched his back and considered the problem. The captain was going to want to talk

to him the minute his eyes opened. That was okay, as long as Spock woke up on his own, which wouldn't happen if Jim. . .

"Oh, the Captain called while you were in surgery, he wants your report stat and how long till Spock's awake?"

Well, no surprise. "Chapel, who's the closest thing we've got to a Rotweiler?"

She followed his gaze, then grinned. "Houser."

"Get her", he activated the "no visitors" light and added a mental *that includes you, Jim*. "And tell her we're not taking prisoners."

"The captain's not going to like that."

"Yeah, well right now I'm working for Spock."

She looked over his shoulder at the chart, "you expecting trouble?"

"I'll get it whether I expect it or not," he grumbled. His coffee mug was still where he had left it hours before, cold, dust and a strand of hair floating on the surface. He dumped the contents and filled it with whatever was left in the pot. "How's that David holding up?"

The smile was gone, Chapel looked off in the direction of the medical lab. "He's still with her. Asked for permission to wash the body."

There was a catch in her voice that said a lot about love and longing for love. Len handed her a tissue, pulled one for himself. "No problem with that. I'll do her first, shouldn't take long. Maybe you can get him to go for lunch or something."

"I don't think so. He wants to wait until," a hand came up, pushing at the air in front on her face, asking for understanding, "not while the body is still warm. God, Len, he really loved her."

He gave her shoulder a squeeze. "Any one in about Kennedy?"

"Sharp came in and left a couple of hours ago. Oh, the roommate's a little shaken."

"He been in?"

She shook her head, no. "Call from Security." A loud nose blow, a deep breath and Chapel was back to rock solid professional. "Ed Jenkins, that's the roommate, got the news in the worst possible way — finding Security putting a force around Kennedy's side of the room. Weston was worried about him."

One patient, two autopsies, a captain who wanted a report and a miracle, a deskfull of work and an upset roommate per Security. Security always thought they could handle anything, but no one else could. On the other hand, needs of the living before the dead. Christine was looking up at him in that way she had, gawd, she was worse than the captain in expecting miracles. Oh well, it would give David a little longer with Lynn. "Okay, I'll give Jim his update then I'll check on the roommate." Of course, Christine had a much prettier smile.



Ed Jenkins was not in his quarters where McCoy thought he'd be, but a Security guard was. She was on the floor doing knuckle push-ups when he came in, but sprang to her feet, weapon drawn, before he had hardly registered she was there. "Oh, Doc, sorry." The phaser went back to her waist and she exchanged her expression from contained violence to abashed teen. "I wasn't expecting anyone."

Leonard grinned, part friendly, part relief, thank God for training and quick reflexes. "Neither was I — what are you doing here?"

"Waiting to be told I can leave, oh, Ensign Jones, Sir." She jerked her head in the direction of the security shield protecting half the room. "That's doing my job now, but I can't leave until I get clearance."

McCoy looked through the seal at a Vulcan-tidy bed, credenza and desk. "Good lord, do you think he was always that neat?"

"Yup." She agreed, confirming it with a definite nod. "Ed says he's got a thing about everything being perfect — body, cabin and mind. Eddy used to leave a sock on the floor every now and then just to drive him nuts." He must have looked at her strangely, because she blushed even deeper. "Ed's my, ah. . . ."

Oh. "Good, then he won't have to sleep here tonight."

"Altering bunk assignments on active duty is against regulations, Sir."

McCoy grinned at her enormous blue eyes, and chin length white blonde hair — all this plus the ability to bench press 160 pounds. "So's betting on volley ball, hard liqueur and nudie magazines, but I've never known a ship that didn't have all three. Well, then again putting money on Security isn't exactly a bet."

That got a laugh. "No, Sir, it's a sure thing."

It really was good that Ed was not going to have to sleep alone. Until they got Kennedy's things inventoried and in storage that force field was going to be up and sputtering, and with that weird light it threw off, it would be like having a ghost around. And that poster over the bed was not going to help — some saint strung up and stuck with arrows. Not the kind of thing he would want hanging over his bed but then he wasn't particularly religious. The silence stretched out, McCoy looked at the impossibly neat cabin, half of it anyway and marveled again that anybody, besides Spock, lived like that. He must have been hell to live with, but it wouldn't be nice to say so. "Well," he said, fumbling for an exit line, "carry on."

"Sir." Then, "Sir, if you happen to go by Security, do you think you could remind them I'm here?"



Security did not take kindly to the reminder. "We know where our troops are, Doctor, thank you for your concern."

Ask a civil question, start a civil war, okay. Someone had dumped out his last cup of coffee which had gone cold while he was wasting his time in Jenkins quarters. "Chapel, Jim been in?"

"Yes. He stopped in and called twice, I told him you were out goofing off."

The pot was empty so he started a fresh batch. "Thanks, I'll remember that when your review comes up."

She did not look over awed by the threat. "He wanted to know how Spock was." Good question. He walked over to the bed and studied the panel — deep sleep, a body battered and trying to foster the resources to fix itself. "I think he really wanted to know when he was going to wake up."

"And you told him. . ." The smell of coffee drifted across the room, someone had already poured a cup.

"That you'd let him know when he did. Kennedy's death really got to him, didn't it?"

"Ummm." What the captain was going through was not a topic he was going to get into. Spock's respiration was a little too shallow for his liking, probably hurt to breathe deeper. "Any problems here?"

No answer was more of an answer than she had expected. "The usual, Environmental had a problem with a ventilation duct, we got one of the clean-up crew in here for the night — bang on the head." She handed over the report, "Spock's been behaving himself. Oh, David's gone."

He looked at the readings again, not wanting to overlook something. That phaser burn could still cause all kinds of problems. "I'll tell Jim what I told him an hour ago, maybe that'll buy Spock a couple more hours of shut-eye, then might as well get started on those post-mortems."



He had tried, but Kirk was not there when Spock woke, missed it by hours. Captains do not have the luxury of hanging around sickbay waiting for sedatives to wear off, no matter who the patient is. On a ship you can work all the hours God sends and it still wouldn't be enough. He had managed to stop by three times, but hadn't managed to get lucky.

By the time he could go officially off-duty it was late, and Spock was deep in natural sleep. Part of him was relieved. Spock was going to be fine. On the other hand, it was just one more thing gone wrong on what should have been a straight forward, simple planetary survey. Two crewmen dead over 10 hours and he still did not have any answers that made sense. "Damn." He stared at the sleeping figure, willing him to wake up and wave him over — he didn't. Well, lying on his stomach like that, maybe if he could see him. No visitors. On the Enterprise, that usually applied to captains and crew alike. The duty nurse had left her station and was hovering nearby, looking more like a body guard than a health care professional. "Who put the "No visitors" on?"

"Attending physician, Sir. That would be — "

Fist smacked palm. "McCoy, double damn."

"Well," came the chief surgeon's voice, "that's one way to say thank you for hard day's work."

He blew a hard breath out his nostrils. Irritation warred with embarrassment, and won. "Sorry, Bones, this isn't a pastoral visit." He turned around and faced a tired doctor, "I need to talk to him — ship's business."

"No problem, first thing in the morning." With skill bred of long practice McCoy drew the captain away from the ward and back to the office area. He had been expecting something like this and his staff and patients did not need James Kirk around, pacing like a caged tiger. Besides, the one thing Spock needed now was hours and hours of undisturbed rest. His doctor was going to see that he got as much as possible, even if it meant standing guard the rest of the night.

"But I need him now." Kirk complained, sounding more peevish than captainly. He hurled himself into a chair and started drumming his fingers.

Leonard put a cup of coffee into the hand the captain automatically held out. "Then you're out of luck."

"Don't push it."

Military. "Okay. You're out of luck, Sir."

The sweetener was empty, the creamer looked like a spittoon. He shoved them aside, and took it black. "You're not the one who has to write the families. I can't just tell Alice Kennedy "I regret to inform you that your son died" She's got a right to know how and why."

Despite the captain's defiant glare, McCoy knew better. They had sent notices home with a hell of a lot less information than that, depended on the mission. Except, now probably was not the time to point that out. McCoy nodded and sat down, in for the duration. Well, he'd known this one was going to shake the captain up. Not that any death or injury to one of his crew didn't weigh on the man's mind, but Ron had been such a likeable kid, and Jim had seen something in him —

"Fivecoat and Chee were ahead of the main group," the captain continued, airing his obviously practiced complaint, "over a rise and out of sight. Lee's dead, so's Kennedy. Spock's the only one still alive so he's the one whose got to give me my answers."

McCoy did not much like being reminded of the deaths, he took each one as a personal failure, but to come in here demanding that he wake up an injured man just so he could — "And you need to know, right now, and so badly you don't mind risking his — " That wasn't the tact, he regrouped and topped off his friend's coffee cup. "Look, Jim, you need him alert. If I woke him now he'd have to check his service record to tell you how to spell his name."

"That bad?" His attention shifted to McCoy for the first time in the conversation. "You told me his back wasn't serious."

It was an accusation — ship's surgeon withholding information. "It isn't, not on the McCoy scale of the spectacular anyway. I didn't even have to replace any of those ribs, just stuck 'em back together like barrel staves. It's the phaser disruption I'm worried about."

Kirk scowled and studied the wall as if the security report were painted on the wall, found the reference and shook his head. "But Kennedy's phaser didn't fire, it exploded. I thought it was a spare chunk of casing that hit Spock."

"Yup," Leonard poked on his desk a moment, then held up a scored piece of metal wrapped in sealant. "This little number did the obvious damage, nothing permanent, but enough to ruin his day. It's the phaser that didn't explode that's going to make things interesting." He had gone over this with Jim three times, and that didn't count the same speech from M'Benga and Chapel. "You knew he had phaser burn."

"But he came out of that before you took him into surgery."

"Mostly, problem is that when Lee fired her phaser was on kill." McCoy got himself a cup, his mug was stained around the edges with 18 hours of half drunk cups. "He caught the edge of Lee's blast. Kidney damage, lung involvement, some concussive symptoms, general muscular disruption — the way I figure it, if he'd fallen left instead of right he'd be dead." He took a sip, waiting for the captain to make the usual line about Spock's luck with everything except women. He didn't, in fact Jim was too quiet. When he looked at him he cursed himself for a fool. The man had a kind of awed look on his face, the kind a man might wear if some stupid assed doctor had just casually mentioned he'd come within inches of losing his best friend. "Jim, he's going to be fine. If it's critical, of course you can talk to him."

Kirk twisted in his chair, peering out into the darkened ward and listened to the mechanical pulse of the monitors. He took a moment's comfort in the normal sounds of the ship. He needed the information, but he didn't need it right now, he just wanted it, there was a difference even if he didn't want to admit it. "No, let him sleep."

"Good," McCoy said, approving. "At least now one of us has a chance of getting a decent night's rest. Besides, what else could he tell you? I thought it was pretty clear, that pack of gray dogs."

"It doesn't take two to stun a pack of dogs, Bones, and it would have been Lee's job. Besides, she wouldn't have taken out native fauna on kill, she'd have reset."

"So, you think it was something else?"

"Yeah, maybe." He held the warm mug up against his temple, closing his eyes for a minute. "Spock probably didn't see anything anyway. God, he looked like an ugly mess when they brought him up."

There was an expression on Jim's face he had seen before — a vulnerable kind of wistfulness that made James T. Kirk look nothing at all like a starship's captain and everything like a man who needed a friend. Guess he wasn't going off duty for awhile yet, he'd just found himself another patient. "Well, that's genetics. If he'd been lucky, that casing would have taken off half his nose." Kirk chuckled and half relaxed, already prepared to be understood. "I'm sorry about Kennedy, Jim. Losing him has to be especially hard on you."

"When the scale starts at hell how do you measure it?" He took a deep drink of the coffee, scowled and set the cup down. "Bones, this is bad even by sickbay standards."

"You want to talk about it?"

"No." He picked the cup back up and took another sip, it was still disgusting, burnt and warmed over, probably since morning. "It's the waste of it, Kennedy, he was coming along." That was Kirk's term for command potential. "Saw him in the corridor the other day, practically dancing with excitement. He'd just gotten scheduled for the Command Potential Assessment. His whole world was starting to come together — a new girl, approved for Command Potential Assessment, the Tree Huggers two games up in the ship's rotation. This should have been one of the best weeks of his life, not the last."

"And you feel responsible."

He sniffed at the coffee, drank and drank again. "Ultimately I am responsible. That comes with the territory, so does knowing it's going to happen. But it doesn't mean I have to drink contaminated effluent. Whose tube did you drain to get this stuff?"

"If it tastes like pee, how come you're ready for a refill?"

He tilted the cup back and shook his head, as bad as it tasted, he drunk the whole thing. "When did I do that?"

McCoy refilled his own cup, the first complete cup he had actually finished that day. It was horrible, but late night coffee in sickbay as supposed to be horrible. "They tell me they called that kid a stack of books with legs."

Kirk laughed, short and no humor, "Yeah, they used to call me that, too."

"No one's called you anything that nice since."

This time he did get a smile. "No argument. You know, he was a lot like me when I was in the academy. I suppose that moniker was what caught my attention, but he was a lot more than that." Jim blew out a slow breath, eyes not really focused on anything, at least nothing in the present. "He wanted to be in space, he wanted it the way I wanted it — so bad you'd give up a decade off your life, your back teeth and your left nut without thinking twice. I was lucky, I was ambitious as hell and too stupid or stubborn to know that all the odds were against me making captain."

McCoy looked at the lightener and sweetener and made the same decision his captain had, it looked toxic. "And just maybe you were a little talented?"

"Bones, the academy is full of talent. If that's all it took, every midshipman in Bancroft would have their own ship." He shook his head and stretched his legs out in front of him. "No, you've got to have more than your share of luck."

McCoy nodded, thinking that luck had damn little to do with it. Okay, he hadn't gone to the Academy, but he'd have been willing to bet he'd have spotted Jim Kirk as special from across the mall.

"Well Kennedy was smart. When he didn't make command class he transferred to botany, took a double load until he got all the core course work in and still managed to graduate with his class. Focused, you know? If it didn't get him any nearer his goal, he didn't waste his time on it. Said that's what impressed the brass enough to assign him to a starship right out. Bones, you should have seen that kid's face, absolute satisfaction. He'd wanted deep space, worked his ass off and earned it."

"And now he was going to try again for command." He took a sip from his own mug, he was used to sickbay coffee and didn't grimace. "Would he have made it?"

"He might have," Kirk concluded after a moment, "God knows he wanted it badly enough, but there's all those intangibles not even the Vulcans have been able to quantify. But he should have had the chance."

"You know, I remember how it was to be like that — " The captain talked on about the academy, how hard it was to fit in when you actually liked reading history. How he made a name for himself and eventually got accepted on his own terms, and how he wanted that for Kennedy. The Enterprises' chief surgeon listened. That was part of his job, keep the command crew sane, give them an outlet. Helping Jim was the best and the worst of the lot.

"And now I've got to write this damned letter, and I can't tell his folks what the reason was. There has to be a reason. It would make it easier for them, yeah, and for me." He rubbed the sides of the mug, round and round. "There should be meaning in a man's death, in Starfleet there usually is and I want to find it for Ron, and Lynn, too."

Lynn, good. Jim was back on track and that was his cue, too bad he couldn't tell him what he wanted to hear. He put his cup down, staring at the rim. "Jim you might want to go ahead and write those letters without Spock's input."

The nostalgia was gone. "What is it you're trying to say?"

"Spock is a little vague about what happened down there. He couldn't remember the incident when I talked to him either before or after his surgery. It's that phaser blast."

"Trauma induced amnesia?"

"Something like." Kirk's eyes and mind were clearly rooted in the here and now. The friend in need of a friend was gone and McCoy was talking to his commanding officer. Give the man the details, he told himself, never mind that he isn't going to like them. "Lee was Security and, like I said, that phaser was on kill. You know, that isn't the same sort of beam as stun, it's more like a Klingon disrupter. We just don't know much about how long that kind of damage takes to mend. It isn't like we've got a lot of experience with near fatal blasts. When a phaser's set on kill, it usually misses you or does its job. I guess I'm saying I can't promise you he'll ever remember what happened down there."

"More good news, I already checked with Security about his tricorder, it's down with trauma induced amnesia too." He peered into the cup again, marveling that he had actually downed two cups of that brew. "Well, I'm going to finish that letter, then I'm going to sleep. Make sure he's awake the next time I come in."

McCoy smiled and waved him out. Make sure he's awake. Now that was typical. Jim just assumed he could keep him alive.



The letters still wouldn't write. Jesus, Jim, if practice made perfect, you ought to be able to spit the things out in your sleep. A stretch and a bathroom break didn't help. Some things just don't get easier with practice, he finally decided. Problem is, a letter like that should read like no one had ever gotten one before, like the man who wrote it knew, really knew what he was saying. Your son, lover, father, friend is never coming home and I honest to god know what I'm asking you to accept.

"The hell I do," he shut off the screen and rubbed at his neck. "The hell any of us do." Alice Kennedy just lost her only child. Who was he to offer his condolences, who came up with that word anyway? Too damn many syllables to be sincere. Sounded just like some bureaucrat had written it.

"God, I'm sorry Alice." He wanted to tell her that her son was just maybe something special. He already was special to his mother. He wanted to tell her that Ron had shown real potential for advancement, success. But whose definition? His own. Alice might had other ideas, like a smiling face at the Thanksgiving table, like grandchildren who looked like their father.

Well, this wasn't getting him anywhere. He pulled on socks and boots, ran a hand through his hair and left his room and that damned blank screen behind. Not many in the corridors at oh-four hundred. Some third shifters were off-post for their meal break. A few yanked their uniforms into line, self conscious as though they'd been found out in some childish prank. Not used to seeing command gold that time of night, at least not his command gold. He'd worked "the veil" on the way to Blue Run when he was a mid-shipman. Third shifters weren't afraid of command, they just resented it. This was their shift and the rest of the crew was supposed to stay asleep or out of sight.

Kennedy had a girl on third shift. What was her name? Meg, Meg something. Athletic, Ron said she'd taught him a lot about hand-to-hand and stamina. And then he'd blushed like a boy, apologizing; he hadn't meant it that way. Wonder how they'd met? He grinned at a couple of odd dates he'd had years back, him eating breakfast, her eating dinner. Probably where he'd gotten his taste for oatmeal with catsup. The shift difference had broken up Ron's romance, happened to a lot of 'em. He hoped Ron had taken his advice and let her down easy. No sense in outlawing shipboard romance, these were healthy young people after all, but if people weren't adult about it, it could sure make things awkward. Ron would have handled it well. He was a good man. A born spacer.

A few more turns and Kirk was where he needed to be. Stars. He had the observation deck to himself and was glad for it. In most things he was an egalitarian man, but if he could find a way to keep this part of the ship to himself he'd give up his private cabin and bunk with Benson down in the laundry. Not likely to happen.

Ron loved this too, like Kirk, like captain's of all ages, he'd been drawn to his personal sea. He'd talked about it once, quoting some ancient book, about how a ship was like a man forever mounting the female sea. How that kind of eternal joining was almost pure and holy. Jim shook his head and grinned. Ships were women, well not to Ron. To Ron the ship was all that was male — male strength in its weapons, male aesthetics in its muscle hard lines. The ship as an extension of its captain. It was something perfect. Well, he couldn't argue him on that.

Kirk sat down on a bench and leaned back. After more than a decade, you'd think he'd get tired of that view, but it hadn't happened yet. All it did was remind him that this was where he belonged. This was the way he wanted to live, maybe die.

Kennedy died the way he would have wanted to, if nothing else he was certain of that. He'd lost his life in space, and in exploration — doing what he loved. What better death is there than that? How do you explain that to a mother, to anyone who wasn't in the fleet? That need to be in space, that drive for adventure, for command — it didn't make a damn bit of sense to anyone that didn't already understand.

"I regret to inform you," he said out loud. Sounded alien, no one really talked like that. Well, maybe that was what all that ritual language was for, to tell the Alice Kennedy's that they can't understand why this particular death had meaning. That this death was a part of their child's life they can't share in, they can only accept. By the time he got back to his quarters, he did not have to write the letter, all he needed to do was type.



It was deep ship's night when Spock woke, feeling sore and sick. The sedative McCoy had given him left him feeling detached and subject to drifting, but he was determined to stay awake and aware. The mechanical and natural sounds of the medical facility thrummed, but in the background. None of that was attached to him, even the transfusion pack had been removed. Good. How long would he be invalidated? From the ache in his back and the now worse pain in his head, he suspected it would be at least another day, less if he could convince the medical staff to refrain from their usual chemical warfare.

The staff had laid him on his stomach in deference to his injuries, with his face turned toward the dark wall. He pushed up, just enough to turn his head and was pleased to find that he was able to move so easily. In a moment he would try to roll over. Perhaps with the bars he could manage it himself. But what had happened? He must have caught the edge of Lee's shot. He tried an image in his mind, Lee firing at something, Kennedy's phaser exploding and killing Lee, her hand and the beam swinging as she fell. He must have been hit with a piece of casing as well as the beam. Feeling stronger, he reached for the bed rail and grasped it, at the same time pushing up with his far arm. Up, shift his hips, lower the body back. His mouth soured, he swallowed and remained still until he knew he could move, think, without vomiting. Scenario, explosion, casing, beam, yes it sounded reasonable, it fit the few facts that he had. If that speculation was correct, he had been fortunate, it was chance alone that there had not been three fatalities.

From his new vantage he could see a shape in a bed in the outer room. He could not remember if he? She? had been there when he had been brought in. It was annoying to have yet another reminder that he could not remember what had caused the disaster on Laurel III. Lee and Kennedy, two people had died under his command and in his presence and he did not know how. Kennedy would be difficult for Jim. Any death was hard for a commander like him, but Kennedy has shown promise. Jim had as said as much in the last performance review.

Jim. Unconsciously, Spock turned his face and his thoughts in the direction of the captain's quarters. A captain can not afford to be emotionally effected by the death of a crewman, but Spock had yet to serve under a captain who was not. What the enlisted were allowed to see and what actually was were two very different things. As his father taught, always present the face of reason. Jim had laughed and told him his own father's version — be like a duck, calm on top and paddle like hell beneath the surface. The difference was that Vulcan taught how to extend to appearance of calm to the reality. While the captain would be in command and on the bridge in the morning, even now the man would be awake, pacing the floor in frustration, anger and impatience. But there was nothing he could do to change that, Spock knew his limitations and Vulcan's logic offered no comfort to human grief. McCoy would be there, ready to be a friend when Jim was ready to accept one.

Laurell III. What had happened down there? Could he have foreseen and prevented the accident? Had it been avoidable? Had he botched the mission, had he taken the wrong people? Knowing would not bring them back, but his sense of order demanded he understand what had happened, or at least to try. He raised the head of the bed and reached for the terminal arm.

McCoy, Spock reflected later, was a dedicated man. Another Chief Medical Officer might have given the job over to another or let it wait, but Leonard would not allow the remains of a fellow crewmember to simply lay in a storage vault waiting his convenience. "That man's body was damned important to him," he would say, "and the day it stops being important to me is the day I've been a CMO too long."

There were no surprises in the reports. Lt. Lynn Lee had died instantly when a piece of Kennedy's exploded phaser had sliced off the back of her skull. The details of which lobes were severed did not matter. Her death was regrettable, honorable and understandable. She had died doing her duty, phaser still gripped in her hand. Interesting, cadaverous spasm. That possibly explained her shot. She was simply too good to have fired on kill at some native animal. Probably trying to reset when the casing killed her. Kennedy had died from heart failure possibly from biological shock, probably from current leakage.

Current leakage? Spock leaned back against the bed, his vision swimming momentarily from the change of position. What would have caused that, and what connection, if any, was there between that equipment failure and Lee's phaser blast? He would have to ask McCoy for a full description of the clothing, and what details had not yet made it into the jacket. And he would need to speak with Security but for now he would have to content himself with whatever reports had been filed. Security should have something in the banks by now.



McCoy came on duty early, very early, his hair still damp from the shower and the day's first cup of coffee clutched in his hand. The night shift nodded him to the patient beds. He should have known that Vulcan would not do anything sensible like try to get enough sleep. "Spock, when did you wake up?"

"Earlier than you," he replied evenly, his attention still on the debriefing report.

McCoy looked at his patient with fond exasperation. If Spock was one thing, it was consistent. "Ill mannered as always, Mr. Spock. Should I bother to ask how you feel, or will you tell me with your nerve endings?"

"I feel as though I've had adequate medical attention and am recovering within normal limits — assuming that I was caught in the far spread of Lee's phaser blast. Otherwise, you should be brought before a medical board."

Hands spread, he looked to the ceiling. "What more could a doctor ask for? Mind if I check your condition out myself?"

Sarcasm was generally lost on Spock, lost or ignored. He pushed the terminal arm back and sat up straighter, masking the dizziness. "I've gone over the preliminary autopsy. What mechanical device could have caused Kennedy's heart failure?"

The readings were okay, considering, but they would have been better if he had gotten a few hours more sleep. Should he just give the guy an analgesic, or wait till he asked for one? Naw, who knew how long it was going to take for hell to freeze over. "Fivecoat said he was carrying an extra power pack, slung in the middle of his chest. Had to pull it off to get to the xiphoid process. Strange place to wear a pack."

"I didn't order extra packs." Spoken as though everything the crew had was his prerogative, down to their underwear and the flavor of their tooth paste.

"Well, he had one." McCoy took a sip of the coffee, it was fresh, fragrant, wonderful — he had brought it from the mess hall. "I'll have to look at the test results, but the condition of the heart plus some minor chest burns, well it looks like that pack failed and delivered enough of a charge to stop his heart permanently. Fivecoat and Chee were there in forty to seventy seconds, as far as I can tell. Fivecoat has

her med alert and she's been taking the medical program so, as bad as the hand and heart were, they shouldn't have been fatal with the kind of care as fast as he got it. But you push enough current through a heart. . ." He reached for a hypo and dialed up what he thought would do Spock the most good.

"What is that?" Spock demanded as soon as he saw the vial.

"Something for the headache you're going to tell me you don't have."

He watched McCoy administer the medication, his expression much like that of a cat finding grease on its fur. "Perhaps I prefer the headache to nausea."

"Got that covered too," and another hypo.

He accepted the second shot with as much grace as he did the first. A man probably ought to say thank you, instead he changed the subject by turning the screen around and tilted it so both men could read. "Your conclusion is consistent with the ground reports."

Fivecoat: The first one down was Mr. Spock, he was face down with his shirt all over blood. I stopped to check him and David ran to Lynn. Mr. Spock was breathing and his pulse was regular, at least it was so fast I assumed it was. I rolled him over and took off for Ron.

Voorheis: Why did you leave Mr. Spock?

Fivecoat: Rolling him over at least put some pressure on the bleeding, it was all I could do quickly and I had to get to Kennedy — I could see his hand was gone, mostly and should have meant arterial bleeding. So I applied a tourniquet as fast as I could and started CPR.

"Clair Fivecoat is one alert officer," McCoy said in genuine admiration. "She's going to make a damn good nurse when she finishes the program. I'd like to think all my staff thinks that quickly."

"Agreed, but pay attention to the detail — "his hand was gone. . .should have meant arterial bleeding." His heart stopped within that 40 to 70 second period. I remember, quite clearly, seeing the bandage brighten with blood with each compression while Fivecoat and Chee tried to revive him. There was nothing in your preliminary report about blood volume, but I suspect we will find he lost relatively little blood considering his injuries. Shock seems an unlikely explanation."

"I'll check on it," he took another sip, then looked at his patient and offered him the cup. To his disappointment, Spock accepted. "Either way it's still heart failure, why all the attention?"

"Consider Doctor, Kennedy's phaser and power pack both fail at the same moment. While it is possible the two events are unconnected, it requires a faith in coincidence I do not possess."

McCoy thought for a moment and did not like the implications. "Sabotage." He felt sick and sat down rather heavily.

Spock drank deeply, appreciating the flavor, aroma and the feel of fluid in his throat. "Here are the choices — the equipment failed by chance, or it failed by design. If by design, Kennedy was the intended victim or he was not."

"Murder? God, that's worse than sabotage." McCoy took the cup back and drained it.

Why? "Both possibilities are equally distressing."

Behind him the sounds of ship's morning began to grow, footsteps in the offices, soft laughter, breakfast smells. It should have felt comfortable and familiar, it felt threatening and alien. "How are we going to tell. . . ."

"That will be my responsibility."

"Bitch of a way to start a day." He looked mournfully at his empty cup, he had drunk it so fast he had hardly tasted it, now it was gone. "I'd better get that report nailed down for you."

Spock nodded his agreement, then closed his eyes against the throbbing in his head. The medication was helping, but only just. "We will need that data, but in a sense, it is irrelevant. The critical question centers on the equipment and the individuals who handled it." He opened his eyes and focused. "You should have slept later, Doctor. That may have been your last opportunity for some time."



James Kirk had not meant to sleep late, but he had, his body demanding at least four hours. He was still tired — payment for a physically and mentally exhausting day. That's what he got for not setting an alarm, and telling Rand he'd have her in irons if she woke him up. He glanced at his message bay, nothing urgent, good — it could wait till later, he was hungry. Swinging by officers' mess to pick up something portable put him in line for half a dozen questions which were just as much a part of his job to answer as writing that damned letter the night before had been. Then he had to go to the bridge, and turn command officially over to Sulu, per regulations. When he finally made it to sickbay, it was just in time to see an aide patting an unyielding pillow into place on Spock's empty bed. "Where is. . . .?"

"Discharged him an hour ago, Jim." McCoy called from his office, "we got real work to do here, I don't need to keep my sickbay cluttered up just for effect."

"But. . . ." Kirk stopped short. McCoy looked him square in the eye and gave him so slight a nod he wouldn't have seen it if he hadn't been looking. A captain's guts were usually smarter than their owners, his gave a twist before his mind made the connection. Spock thought he had something to do that had to be done now, and couldn't be done in sickbay — and McCoy agreed, going along with a business-as-usual act. Whatever that something was, it wasn't good.

"Got time for a cup of coffee?" McCoy continued with what the ship's captain now recognized as a performance.

"Sure, but I'm not likely to get that here. Vent freeze maybe, coffee, never." He waved a convincing farewell and left. *What the hell was going on?*



"Come."

Kirk was already in the room before the invitation came, "What have you got for me?" he asked as soon as the door closed. Spock was not at his desk. Kirk looked around and found him was working at a sofa that had not been there before, he was more lying on it than sitting. "You okay?"

"Captain." Voorheis stepped out the darkened bedroom where he had obviously scooted at his knock.

"Sir," Spock began formally, "What I am about to tell you is a working theory. Security Chief Voorheis and I are already planning to process that will prove or disprove that theory.

"The autopsy report of Ensign Kennedy shows he died of cardiac arrest caused by a massive energy charge to the heart. That dose was definitely delivered by the spare power pack. It happened to have been worn over his chest, but McCoy's conclusion is that the surge would have been sufficient to kill had it touched his body at any point. The evidence we have suggests the power pack failed in response to a phaser shot, though whether it was Lee's or Kennedy's I can not say."

Voorheis uncovered a meal tray to reveal bits of fused metal and circuitry. Another covered dish held the power pack. All were incased in Security clearpac, sealed and time stamped. Spock met Kirk's stare and said what had to be said. "Power packs are designed to disable themselves in the act of failure. Phaser's are designed to fuse, unless they are deliberately set to overload, where an explosion is the desired outcome. When two pieces of equipment fail, and fail simultaneously in atypical ways. . ."

"It is reasonable to assume they've been tampered with." Kirk exhaled in a long hiss. He had calculated best, worst and expected cases on his way to his FO's quarters. This was worst case. "What's the plan and who knows about it?"

Spock answered. "The three of us, plus McCoy."

"Strictly need to know," Voorheis continued, "We'll begin with checking records of who had access to the weapons room in general and to these pieces in specific. I'll look for evidence of sabotage in the equipment. Sir," this to Spock, "I'm going to have to bring at least one of my staff in on this."

"Weston?"

"That's who I had in mind."

"Good man."

The far wall had a tapestry of an abstract bird in black and gold. Kirk didn't like it much so he had never asked what it was. You don't ask questions unless you're willing to deal with the answers and he'd always given it an even shot that Spock's mother had made the thing. "As soon as you've got what you need out of the weapons room I want every piece inspected and tested."

"Yes," Voorheis covered the dishes and picked up the tray. "No risk in that, if this was deliberate, they'll expect us to do that anyway, it is standard procedure." He paused for a moment, then assumed he'd been dismissed. "Sir," to Spock, "Captain," to Kirk.

Kirk grabbed a chair and sat down, his attention on the assortment of report chips scattered over the work table. There were a lot more possible explanations that he did not like than explanations that he did. "It's hot in here."

"28."

He picked up the nearest chip, then set it aside. Autopsy reports, he'd read those. He did not want to read another any time soon. Spock normally adjusted the temperature down for visitors, or invited them to set it where they wanted it. "Are you sure you're well enough to coordinate this?"

Spock had relaxed against the sofa's back, his eyes closed, now he opened them, and met his captain's steady gaze. "My major involvement will be over soon. I will rest then."

"That isn't an answer." Kirk studied his friend. He looked exhausted, sick and damned uncomfortable. "Well, maybe it is." He did not need Spock to explain the logic of the situation. "Okay, whoever was behind this would expect an investigation and, as landing party officer, you'd would be the one, but don't overdo it, okay?" They had to keep things looking as normal as possible; releasing Spock from sickbay was part of the game. They don't make you captain if you can't figure things like that out. Everything was just fine, even when it wasn't when there was the question of the ship's safety to consider. If people got used up in the process, well, that was part of the bargain when you joined Starfleet. In exchange for the fun of being underpaid, Star Fleet got to risk your life any time they felt like it.

"Sorry I wasn't there when you woke up."

"Whatever for?"

"I was worried about you and Iowa isn't that far from Missouri." Spock gave him that non sequitur look that the bridge crew called the Vulcan Special. "Missouri, the show-me state? McCoy said you were going to be fine but we humans like to see for. . . never mind. Your theory is that those weapons were sabotaged. You don't think it's a theory and neither do I. It's a given. What's your real theory?"

"It would be illogical to theorize in advance of my data."

Kirk bristled, then grinned. "Thank you, Sherlock."

"My mother's insistence on studying Earth's classics was only somewhat less emphatic than my father's position on Vulcan philosophy." The confidence was designed to relax his captain; it succeeded. "Jim, at this point our investigation can be outlined as a series of simple yes/no questions and we will make progress rapidly. It might be better to concentrate on finding those answers first."

"I'm not asking for answers you haven't had time to find. I'm asking where you think this could lead." He paused. "And notice I said could lead."

"Your terms, then." He picked up the coffee that had been the only real food item on the tray. This thirst, it was as though he couldn't drink enough. "Given that all of us expect that the equipment was modified, I am preparing to look for evidence of a clumsy murderer."

"What?"

"Consider, if you were a saboteur, would you blatantly advertise yourself by the messy death of an insignificant junior officer? Wouldn't you have tried for a bigger target, or used a more subtle method?"

"A higher form of killing."

Spock thought a moment, then placed the quote. "Fritz Haber."

"I've met you mother. That doesn't sound like her idea of a classic."

"Commander McGillis at the academy."

Kirk sighed, he had taken the same course. It had been the most depressing of his education. "Of course, it could be a very clever saboteur, delude us into thinking one thing, then hit us from another direction."

That idea had crossed his mind, been considered and discarded. "Not with weapons. Tricorders, perhaps, but the inventory, control and use history of the arsenal is far too detailed. Any saboteur skilled enough to have made it on to a starship would not make it so easy to find a trail. Not everyone on board is as well informed."

There was a spare cup on the tray, Kirk helped himself to the rest of the coffee, draining it in two gulps. "Now that's a pleasant set of choices. Either Starfleet's personnel have been infiltrated, or the psych tests are letting jackals into the program."

"Not necessarily. People change under the stress of confinement during deep space missions. You know the demographics as well as I."

He did. Out of every 3000 deep space person years there would be twenty-three point six deaths. Twenty-one dot six die in the line of service, one at a shipmate's hand, and one by his own. "With all the action this ship sees, I guess I thought we'd already made our contribution to the statistical distribution."

"Jim, we have not yet determined that this was anything other than an accident."

"Point taken." He stood up, knowing the meeting was over but feeling the slightest bit of satisfaction, like having a lettuce salad for breakfast. A stretch and a yawn he did not need stalled the inevitable. "Nice tapestry, that." Then, just before he left. "Why would anyone want to kill Ron Kennedy?"

Spock had been wondering the same thing.



The coffee was gone, what McCoy and Voorheis had not consumed, Kirk had. Spock considered getting more. When he got up and started across the room, he changed his mind and opted for going to the head and being sick. That done, he returned to the sofa and lay down. This disability was so counterproductive. It was going to be damned inconvenient to conduct this investigation by remote control. The use of the expletive surprised him, the recent influence of McCoy perhaps. If an intellectual exercise it must be, then it must be; complaining was equally counterproductive.

"I'm not asking for answers you haven't had time to find. I'm asking where you think this could lead — notice I said could lead."

Although Spock might have been loath to put voice to his suspicions, he was certain enough to begin what must be the next steps. Kirk and McCoy, he knew, would look first for motivation. While motivation

was significant, Spock was more concerned with opportunity. He had no excess energy to waste, he could concern himself only with the possible.

Voorheis had been busy, there was already a fair amount of information available on both the weapons, movements of the landing party and Kennedy. According to the log, there were twenty-nine minutes between the time Kennedy was issued his weapons and the time he reported to the transporter room. Assuming the equipment was in standard condition when issued — and for now he was making that assumption — the fatal modifications had to have been made in that time. It simply was not possible that Kennedy could have given up his equipment on the surface. Lee's security tricorder had been active, and had recorded no instance or moment when equipment could have been exchanged.

In his logical way, Spock started a time line, the first entry was 09:12, Kennedy called to landing party duty, the second was 09:31, Kennedy issued phaser. The time line would end with 10:01 Kennedy reports to transporter room. The challenge would be to fill in as much of the intervening time as possible. With each successive entry, the field would narrow. If he were clever enough and, yes, lucky, eventually the field would narrow to one.

The room spun and blurred around him as he leaned forward towards the intercom, he swallowed, hard, against the rebellion in his stomach and his back. He paused, caught his breath and reached again. It should be simple enough to find at least one more entry.



Sulu let himself into Spock's office and turned the heat down before he turned the lights up. Somewhere in the ship's control system a record was being made of the change — how much and how long. That kind of bean counting was part of what made the ship run, normally he did not think a thing of it, but today he wondered just how much of that sort of thing was being monitored. "I bet I'm going to get a call from Security," he told the walls, "and if I do, then I'm going to know something I'm not supposed to know."

Actually, he already knew something he was not supposed to know. "Help Spock out with the administrative work — you can use his office." That's what Kirk had told him, but told him in the lift along with one of those James. T. looks. Whatever he read or found today went to senior command, and only senior, senior command. And that meant that there was something about Laurel III that was not going to make it in the ship's log, at least not the copy the crew saw.

That's what being bridge staff was all about, getting told just enough to get yourself in trouble but not enough to get you back out. "Well, that's why I joined the fleet." He adjusted the chair, Spock was a heck of a lot taller than he was, and logged into the personnel records, sighing a little when he got access. It wasn't like the captain to forget a detail like making sure his code was cleared, but until that "Access Approved. Query?" came up you could never be sure.

At least working in Spock's office was easy. He kept everything super neat, everything was where you would expect to find it and you never had to worry about invading someone's personal stuff. No photocubes of mom and dad, no half eaten rolls of breath mints, except for that plant that made the whole place smell like the desert world exhibit, there was not a thing in the room that was not fleet issue. Small favors. It was still the FO's office.

Lee's file was short and simple — no personal notes and nothing complicated. Her insurance and her accounts went a third to her sister, a third to her parents and a third to David. Worldly goods went to David, anything he did not take to her sister. Pretty standard stuff.

Kennedy's was not, which he had expected and which was why he had done Lee's first. First there were the personal notes, a long list of things he'd lent to Stokes, Jenkins, Steward. Well, it was not the list that was long, it was the detail. Lent to Stokes, one full set of Tech-pro discs, model 4480 — then on in detail about the condition of each of the five discs. He laughed, Ron was Ron. He was nice enough, but his theories of perfection were pretty self-centered. He seldom gave a damn about anything he borrowed from you. On the other hand, if you had something of his he would tell you exactly how to take care of it and if it came back with so much as a scuff mark more than it had, you'd better 'fess up, apologize and explain.

"Security — respond please," came from the intercom. "It's Sulu, Wes." Weston's laugh came back, filtered but friendly. "Figured it was you. Covering for the big guy?"

"Just helping out."

"Yeah. Don't forget to turn the heat back up when you leave."

"No problem."

He copied out the loan list and made a transfer to Security. Let them get the stuff back, their job anyway. They could take care of that as part of the inventory. The will looked like it was going to be a challenge too, he scanned the contents, pausing to giggle over a description of Spock, wait — what the hell?



McCoy spent most of the morning searching the Military Medical Record for anything he could find on current related heart failure. MRO went back almost as far as Starfleet did, but you can't find data that isn't in it. He switched terms and started reading files about power packs. Power packs, he was finding out, just don't fail by accident, but you would not want to be near them when they explode. Oh the hell with it, he was not going to make this into an accident because it wasn't. Spock was right and they both knew it.

Spock, now there was another topic. He started over, this time looking for phaser burn and Vulcans and or humans. That ought to spit up something. God, Len, you ought to be hauled up on charges for letting that man out of sickbay. You know he is not going to get any rest and better than even odds you'll have to redo all that repair work if he puts any kind of strain on those muscles. Serve him right.

"Excuse me, Doc?"

"What." He turned around before he remembered who he was mad at and nearly succeeded in wiping the smile off Sulu's face. "Sorry, bad morning, can I get you some coffee?"

The navigator looked at doctor's cup, "ah, no thanks."

"Coward." He poured himself a cup, and one for Sulu on principle. When a senior officer offers you a cup of coffee, you're supposed to take it. "So, that wrist acting up on you again?"

"Nope, I've been wrapping it before games, just like you said."

"Good boy." He handed him the cup and settled back in his chair. "Then what brings you here?"

"Looking for advice, Doc." He took a seat opposite McCoy and leaned forward. "With Mr. Spock down I'm helping out on some of the administrative stuff, and there's this. . . ." He dropped a tape into a viewer. "Kennedy's will. He left most of his shipboard stuff to Mr. Spock, the captain and a couple of others."

"So, what's the problem? Security's got a seal on, and they'll have to do an inventory before they pack his quarters, they can just set those things aside."

"The problem is some of that stuff wasn't his to give away."

"What?"

"Well, Sir, I can only speak for myself but, this yoroidoshi is mine."

"Your what?"

"It's a knife, Doc, about a foot long, lacquered sheath with chrysanthemums, little wave swirls on the blade." McCoy blinked in surprise. He wanted to say it was probably an oversight, but could not. You might forget borrowing a shirt, but not a great big knife. Sulu was sitting still, but he was starting to blush. "I wouldn't make a big thing of it, but it was my grandmother's."

"I'll explain it to Spock."

"Thanks." Sulu hesitated, then, "but I'm going to have to talk to Security, just in case any of the rest of this is, well, he left his books to the captain and what if some of those are, ah. . ."

Oh, now he saw the problem. "I'll explain it to Jim, too." Good Lord, what was he supposed to explain? That the stack of books with legs had feet of clay? The captain was not going to like that. Not at all.



Then again, there were a lot of things that the captain did not like. One of them was his office. If James Kirk was ever given a hand in designing a ship, he'd make damn sure no one gave the captain an office. As soon as you had an office people came up with all kinds of work that you had to do in it. Captain's offices were invented for the sole purpose of keeping the captain off the bridge. Kirk picked up Spock's summary report from the last month and shoved it in the viewer. He was behaving like a brat, knew it, and wasn't certain there was anything he could do about it. Everything in him wanted to take action — test the arsenal, run staff checks, cross checks, interview Fivecoat and Chee — what he was going to do was stay in this twice cursed office and make the day look normal, just in case anyone was watching. God he hated being so adult.

Rand probably hated it too, he was making her day a positive bitch; paperwork he had meant to get read, written or assigned was getting done with a vengeance. Lucky for her he had gotten a late start. At least this wouldn't last all that much longer. There was precious little there he needed to pay any real

attention to, so he didn't. Anything of any real significance was brought to his attention by his senior staff as they damned well better. The same staff who would be telling him if his ship was infected or putrefying.

At the bottom of one of the stacks he came across a report on the history of grain cultivation and its role in emerging societies. Kennedy. That was how he had met him. A few months back they had been scheduled to transport an agrologist to some high level negotiations for colonization. He hadn't wanted to go through that trip ignorant, so he had grabbed Sharp in the corridor and told him to send up someone who could work fast and write for idiots. Sharp sent up Ron Kennedy.

Kirk leaned back in his chair and thought about Ron as he had been — full of ambition, good natured and crazy about his hobbies. He was worse than Sulu when it came to obsession about his flavor-of-the-month interests. That first meeting, Ron breathless and all ill-contained grins at being called to the captain's office. That had impressed him. People did not mind being called to the bridge, but more often than not, the captain's office meant trouble — or work they did not have time to do.

"A lot of people think of this as being called to the principal's office."

"Well, Sir, I guess I was always a good student, so I never worried about it."

No, not impressed, he'd been charmed. "Good, I've got a term paper for you to write. . ."

True to his word, Ron had come up with a report that would have let him have an intelligent conversation with the lady agrologist, if UFP hadn't decided that it was easier, cheaper and politically wiser to just give the place to the Klingons rather than enter into a long term battle with a nasty grain bore that could not be eliminated without disrupting the food chain of about two hundred species of song and game birds planet-wide. The Federation experts put together a model that showed that without the bore, the birds would feed off the insects that were supposed to pollinate the grain. Short term frustration, long term starvation for the colonists. Of course, no one bothered to mention the bore to the Klingons. If their scientists couldn't predict a simple food chain, this was a good time for them to learn.

When the mission was scrubbed, Ron had been devastated — no one was going to read his report. "It was my chance, Sir, to show you what I could do for the ship, for you. What good's being a walking stack of books if nobody needs to know anything you've got to tell?"

A walking stack of books, the memories that had brought back. He could see a lot of himself in that boy. Over the next four months he had worked with him, given him research projects, gave him more than his share of landing party duty, that's what the brass looked for in command track — and encouraged him in his ambitions. And Ron had responded, in spades, even come close to beating him at chess a couple of times. Maybe he'd have made it in command, maybe not. But by God, he should have had the chance.

"Captain?"

"Yes, Rand?"

"I've taken the liberty of laying out your dress blues, if you hurry, there's enough time to shower before you —

The captain pushed the report aside and looked at his yeoman for the first time. "What am I in blues for?"

Rand stopped puttering with whatever it was she thought wasn't in captainlike order. "The service for Lee, Sir. You're needed for the rites."

He was on his feet and headed for the door. "Why didn't you tell me it was today?" She didn't say anything, but the fact was that she had — for some reason he just had not associated the term today with today.



McCoy looked around the chapel in grim satisfaction. This just was not a ship full of people doing a job, they were a crew, almost a family. Security was there in force, but so was Botany, Chemistry and Engineering. Hell, even half of the bridge crew and medical had squeezed into the chamber. Spock had arrived, paid his condolences to David then taken a seat near the door looking solemn, pale and not the least bit repentant about ignoring his doctor's order to stay in bed. "As leader of the landing party, it is my responsibility to be here."

"But you were wounded, they all know that."

"If I am well enough to have been discharged, I am well enough to attend." But that non-expression on his face had said he would have been there no matter what. Lynn Lee had died protecting him. If that debt must go unrepaid, it would not go unacknowledged.

Jim was there — he had caught sight of him a few minutes before standing out in the hall. The captain looked as though he'd hurried more than a little to get there in time, but people expected that, a captain is supposed to be busy. He'd stopped and was talking to David and a few others, going over the order of the service probably. Then he saw them straighten their tunics and their resolve, the bosun's whistle blew and it started.

While Kirk went through the formal rite, not long, but steeped in Fleet tradition, McCoy let his mind drift back through a hundred or so services he had sat through, a few for friends, more for patients who'd been brought to him too late, too many or too fast to be saved. He understood Spock's insistence, he too had a duty to the fallen, and like Spock, if he couldn't fulfill the duty, he could at least acknowledge it.

What kind of masochists are we, he wondered, all of us who wear the white. We go into the war knowing we can't win, we can only beat back the enemy so many times but ultimately we will lose. This time he'd lost quickly, known defeat the moment the battle had been joined. That ought to make it easier. Maybe it did but like Jim said, when the scale starts at hell, how do you measure?

The formal words said, David took over. He looked calm, sad and almost serene. He talked about Lynn and how she had planned for everything in her life — everything except falling in love. Lynn had loved chocolate chip cookies, living in space, cold pizza, sepia prints, stories where people wrote with quill pens, and she'd loved her friends.

A few people were crying now, gentle little sobs, like rain. One of the larger members of Security blew his nose, loudly, and David changed to her sense of humor. In the end, it was one of the most cathartic experiences Leonard McCoy could remember. By the time he was done David had pulled those people through life, loss and remembrance. They were ready now, they could let go. What a woman Lynn must have been to have someone like David love her.

"Bones."

He dabbed at his eyes with his tunic sleeve and followed his captain. "Did you see Spock leave?" Why didn't these blasted uniforms have pockets? A man needed a place to stow a tissue.

"Yeah, he slipped out right after David finished. Headed for bed, I hope." The captain pressed the hand of someone walking by, it didn't matter whose. "He looked like a sorry dog's tail."

"He always looks like a sorry dog's tail, I'll check on him later."

Kirk continued to walk down the corridor, not really headed anywhere but away from the crowd. "Has anyone talked to you about Ron's service?" He shook his head, no. When was he put in charge of funerals? "Well, try Amy Jackson down in Engineering. They just started going together. If she isn't the right one to say the words, try Janice Brown in physics or Meg, ah, third shift, communications, Meg Welling. That's why they broke up, hours didn't mesh at all. Anyway, one of them will know who should speak. I want that service tomorrow afternoon at the latest."

"Sure, Jim."

"I'm serious, Bones, I want that service done." He had already pulled off his gloves and was undoing the top of his dress tunic. "Lee's service just made it real for this entire ship, they won't be able to put it behind them until Ron's is done, too." A wall unit sounded, calling the captain to duty. "Take care of it, let me know when to be there, make sure I write it down, that's an order."



"Isn't that just like the man? He worries about each of us as individuals and collectively." The med scan was telling him that Spock was a lot better than he looked, but that wasn't saying much. Still, he was better than his doctor thought he had a right to be, but he wasn't about to admit it. He may have had to be at that service, but he shouldn't have been there. "You know how hard this one is for him."

"Yes," Spock leaned back into the cushions and let McCoy fuss over him. The time up had exhausted him, but that was all, the sooner he could convince the doctor to leave the sooner he could rest.

"How's the head?" That shot should not have worn off this soon, but the 'corder said the man was miserable. No answer, not that he'd expected one. "What the hell happened down there, anyway?"

"You know as much as I." Hadn't he read the report?

Idiot, you know how much Spock enjoys memory gaps. That ought to get you a lot of cooperation. "Yeah, gray dogs." He gave his patient a second dose and made a note to order up something stronger for the night. "Still doesn't make sense to me, thought. I mean, why would Lynn and Kennedy both fire?"

Stop being churlish, Spock scolded himself. The headache was worse, but that was no excuse. "I don't recall reading that."

"Well, then how did — what, you saying they didn't?" He snorted and gave Spock another shot, this one to settle his stomach, thought it probably wouldn't work. Vulcan bodies might be stronger than most humans, but Vulcan tummies were as fragile as tissue. "If Lynn didn't shoot, what hit you?"

"She shot, but I doubt it was intentional. Lee was too fine a security guard to fire kill at an animal. I believe Kennedy shot, the casing hit Lee and her hand spasmed." It was annoying to think his headache yielded to medication, but not at all to his own efforts. "The phaser was still tightly gripped in her hand when her body was brought up, was it not?"

"Cadaverous spasm." Spock was not the only one with memory gaps, he had written the autopsy report, he should have remembered. Spock's shoulders relaxed a bit under the massage, as McCoy encouraged the muscles to share the medication. The shots would be most effective if he got them in his rear, but McCoy wasn't about to insist. Poor bastard had been through enough. That headache read like a knife between the eyes. Knife. "Oh, almost forgot. Sulu's been doing some disposition work and ran into a problem, seems Ron Kennedy left you a knife that was actually on loan from him — "

It was unlike Sulu to worry about a single possession he could easily retrieve. Spock scowled at the information, what occasioned this concern? And why would Kennedy have left anything to him in the first place? "His yoroidoshi?"

Sounded like Spock had pronounced it right, too. "He thought since Kennedy had left his books to Jim and some equipment to Stokes we'd better check to make sure everything else was really his. Kind of odd that he'd do that, giving away someone else's stuff, him being religious and all, had a picture of a saint over his bed." He shook his head. "But why he couldn't have picked something restful, like St. Francis and the birds — this guy was strung up and shot full of arrows."

"St. Sebastian."

"That'd be the one. Arrow in the armpit. Not my idea of sweet dreams."

"Interesting. McCoy, has anyone spoken to you about Kennedy?"

"Yeah, Jim." He grinned and sat down, helping himself to some of the lunch sickbay had brought in, "talked about you, too, said you looked like a sorry dog's tail and that you should listen to your doctor."

The smell of food was a problem, how was it possible to be so hungry and not want to eat? "Being singled out by the captain for special attention could, in some cases, create problems, could it not?"

Some days baiting Spock was no fun at all. "Suppose so, don't know that it did."

"I believe we should find out."

The man didn't have to say anything else, he'd been delegated. "I'm not a trained investigator, you know."

"On the contrary, if a physician is nothing else, he is a trained investigator, all I am asking is that you expand the scope of your attention."

He helped himself to the cherry muffin the dieticians had given Spock for desert. "Oh, may as well. Jim's already told me to line up someone for the words, I guess that's as good a cover as any. Eat your lunch, then get some sleep. I'll be back."

Spock nodded absently, already accessing the legal files.



The observation deck was, as usual, almost empty. Ironically, most of those who lived among the stars seldom took the time to look at them. Maybe most of them did not like to be reminded that a thin metal membrane kept out the cold vacuum of space. Not James Tiberius Kirk. It was not so much that he had supreme faith in the ship's designers, it was that he could no more think of his ship betraying him than he could think of his mother pushing kittens down the garbage disposal. Enterprise was more than his home, she was his ship. And to those who wear command gold, the bond between brothers is a flimsy excuse compared to the commitment they give to their ship. And when James Kirk stood at that window, it was as though he could pull the energy from those stars the same way the trees of home pulled their life from Sol.

He needed that renewal now. That service was hell. Until David started talking, the only thing he had known about Lynn Lee was what he'd read in her service jacket. Now he was half in love with her and nursing an aching void where she should have fit. What a magnificent person she must have been. And David. He made a note to mention him to Fleet Central, that man was something special. God, what an honor to serve with people like David, Lynn and Ron. What a responsibility.

What a service. He'd barely made it through without breaking down. How the hell was he going to make it through Ron's? Bad form to cry in front of the crew. The crew needed to think their captain was a well of strength so deep and pure that he could never be emptied. But here with just his ship the diamond hard edges of the stars blurred. It hurt. It burned. The corridors, the labs, the bridge, they were pocked with holes that should be filled with Ron's laugh, Ron's grin, Ron's future.

Today, just today, he'd forgo his workout, he just didn't think he could face the gym right now. That was where they'd done a lot of their talk, locker room talk, weight room talk, the kind of idle boasting men do when they shed their uniforms and shoot the shit. Himself, he stuck to his normal rotation of hand-to-hand and weights, followed up with running, tennis or whatever to give him the aerobics. Ron bounced from sport to sport the way he went through hobbies and women. But these last few weeks he'd been all volley ball, anything that would help him jump higher, spike harder. The Treehuggers were by gawd going to take Security. He grinned and shook his head, those had been good times, young crew starting out, that renewal always made him swell with pride.

How many crew had he brought along? Henderson, now on the Exeter, was one of the special ones. Wagner, she already had her own ship. That was the hard part, he'd brought young crew along before, and he always lost them. Thank god, most of the time he lost them to other ships. Or lost them, like Sulu, when they had learned enough to know their captain wasn't some infallible god, just another man. They stopped being students and started being comrades. There was satisfaction in that, in doing his job. Losing them to death, that happened too, and it made you wonder if it was worth it. He stood and looked out at the stars until he found an answer.



As soon as McCoy left, Spock eased back on the sofa and let his mind sink into meditation. It was nothing to keep his body motionless except for the slow rise and fall of his chest as his lungs drew and expelled breath. His exhaustion was oddly comforting, it was fitting that attending Lee's service should have some physical cost. Fitting? And what would his father say to that? What energy he had lost to the service

would be quickly regained, death lasted a very long time. Still, he found himself actually annoyed when he realized that McCoy's medications were helping.

Dismissing the whole line of thought as illogical, Spock began to sort through the information available. It was not unlike the jigsaw puzzles his mother favored. Assuming all the facts were there, he should be able to put them together to form a coherent picture. And there was a pattern to these events, of that he was certain. As capricious as fate might seem, most events unfolded according to some internal order. The job of the scientist was to find that order and use it as a basis for explanation and prediction.

The picture he had chosen to construct was that of a chain. At the end of the chain was Kennedy's body, heart stopped by a massive dose of current delivered by a jimmied power pack, so massive that even Enterprises technology could not repair or replace the muscle.

0912 Kennedy called to landing party duty

0920 Kennedy leaves Botany

0931 Kennedy signs out phaser and pack

0938 two minutes water use in Kennedy/Jenkins quarters (?)

1001 Kennedy reports to transporter room

Question, had the power pack been compromised when Kennedy signed it out, or did it occur between sign out and beam down? Question, why had Kennedy worn a power pack? Question, was Kennedy the intended recipient of the power pack and phaser? If the pack were rigged after sign out, then Kennedy was certainly the intended victim. Question, what purpose was served by Kennedy's death? Question, why had Kennedy willed other's possessions? And why had he willed a largely ceremonial dagger to him? Why had he willed anything to him at all?



Someone to say the words. Captains might conduct the formalities but not the eulogies, never the eulogies. When that had changed McCoy did not really know, but he understood why. A captain can not afford to think of each of his crew as living breathing individuals, not when there's a chance he'd have to send them out to die. It made them too cautious or too solitary. Too careful or too crazy, you didn't trust exploration, or a hundred and fifty billion credit ship to either one. So on every ship he had served the tradition had been the same. The captain would read the rites, for one or a hundred, but someone else said the words about what had been lost.

Doctors, he thought grimly, didn't do 'em either. He didn't like to attend them and didn't when he could decently avoid them. He had not gone to his wife's second wedding either, and for the same reasons. There were some things that were just too damn much to ask.

But as if this job wasn't bad enough. . . McCoy felt like the lowest louse, going around looking for someone to speak for Kennedy, what he was really doing was looking for someone who had something to say against him. He just was not cut out to be a detective or a spy. Even as a kid his buddies always made him play a hostage or a corpse or something.

Why couldn't someone have come forward already, he complained, feeling sorry for himself. David had stepped right up. Those two, they would have made a good marriage, both of them loving space and each other. They probably would have been happy for a long time. Till death us do part — they'd done better than he had.

He sighed as he made his way to engineering. People handled death in different ways. David had been there, hovering in the corridors when they'd brought Lynn up. He had sat with the body until it was cold, then he washed his love before the sickbay staff put her away. Ron's girl hadn't been by, not that he'd seen anyway, but he didn't hold it against her. Lots of people had problems dealing with death and the dead. It was just another human reaction. But Jim was right, if Amy Jackson couldn't bring herself to talk about Ron, she'd probably know someone who would.

"Len!" The Chief Engineer waved a greeting and bounded across the deck to meet him. "Good timing, I was just ready to tear myself away from the controls and get down to the work the Fleet thinks they pay me for."

"Scotty." He let himself be led to his friend's office and served a cup of the best coffee to be had on the ship. Everyone knew the department's reputation for distilling whiskey, but their ability to take water and ground beans and produce nectar was generally ignored. He had been too quiet while he drank his cup and M. Scott noticed.

"Not a social call is it?"

"Nope," he held out his already empty cup and got a refill, "how do you do it?"

A big grin, "we did a careful study of how you make the stuff in sickbay, then we did the exact opposite."

"You too?" He shook his head in almost real exasperation. "Why does everyone pick on sickbay?"

"Because you deserve it," Montgomery topped the cup again and settled back in his chair. "Now, why did you come?"

"Ron Kennedy."

"The lad who died on Laurel III yesterday noon," he nodded in confirmation, a young life lost was a loss for them all. "And a damn shame. I had dinner with him and the rest a few times, nice kid, full of himself, liked everyone and everyone liked him, so far as I could tell. But how does that bring you here? He was in Botany."

"His lady works for you." Scotty leaned forward, interested. Like most people who worked in space, he had developed an unholy taste for gossip. "Amy Jackson."

"You're kidding." He started to laugh and turned it into a cough. "That bit of a boy and our Jackson?"

Leonard sipped his coffee the way an embarrassed cat licks base of her tail. "You know something I don't."

"Well, let's just say I think someone gave you bad information." He pushed himself out of his chair, stuck his head out the door and bellowed. "Jackson, someone get me Jackson."

"High tech approach to an intercom." McCoy observed, he got up and helped himself to more coffee.

"We got enough tech in here, what we need is some human, ah, Amy. You've not met Doctor McCoy before?"

He turned, gaped and choked all in one motion. Amy Jackson was the most stunning six feet of woman he had ever met. "Pleased to met you, Ms. Jackson."

"Sir." She looked slightly puzzled, her green eyes receptive but decidedly concerned, as though wondering why the Chief Medical Officer of the Enterprise had come all the way to engineering to see her. The CMO was wondering the same thing. Once he got his cup safely on the desk without spilling it, he found his professionalism. "I'd like to express my condolences on your loss. We did what we could, but I'm afraid it was just too late."

Amy turned to look at her boss, thick auburn hair swinging with the motion of her head. "Too late? Was I supposed to. . . ."

The chief engineer stifled his grin out of decency and took pity on them both. "Dr. McCoy came about Ron Kennedy, the botany boy who was killed yesterday. He, ah, he'd been told you were, ah, close."

Her cheeks flushed with more embarrassment than McCoy felt. "I'm terribly sorry, Sir, but I, he sat with us at lunch a few times last week but, I never, he did not. I'm sorry, Sir. Someone must have gotten the name wrong, I think he was going with Janice from Physics."

"Thank you, Jackson." Scotty said.

"Sir, Sir," then she made what was clearly an escape.

Scotty didn't let the silence hang very long. "She's one of the most gifted anti-matter containment engineers I've known and one hell of a good looking woman. She loves the ship, she loves the engines but, as far as I know, she hasn't found anything human to love. Though I've seen her head turn a few times for Spock. . . ." McCoy stared at his boots while his ears faded from screaming blood red to humiliated pink. "So far as Ron went, he had been having dinner with some of the Engineering crowd, never did figure out the connection. Must have been friends with someone, or maybe he was trying to get to know Amy. Better men than him have tried. But like I said, I think someone gave you the wrong information."

"To tell you the truth, I always thought he might not be that much for the women, the way he'd go on about his theories on perfection and purity." He rubbed at his mustache, pulling at the ends out of habit. "That's probably just me," he concluded after he got his lip hair in order. "If you don't get it all tied up in bows and heart shaped boxes, sex can be just another way for men and women to enjoy a bout of exercise. Ron probably thought everything had to have some greater meaning."

"You never felt that way?"

"Maybe, back before the flood." Scotty leaned back, hooking his heel on a cart and hauling it into position for a footstool. "It's been a long time since I had a young man's sense of romance. But telling you that Amy, now that's a pretty dirty trick. Who did you say told you?"

"Jim," McCoy muttered, "Jim Kirk."



He had not meant to fall asleep, but when the door signal buzzed, he started awake. How long? Minutes only. "A moment." He roused, straightened his cloths and moved to his work area, he felt much stronger. "Come."

"Sir." Weston stepped in, conveying attention in every muscle.

"At ease, Lieutenant. You have a report?"

"Sir." Spock accepted the extended tape. "Weapons inventory, maintenance and use history, Sir."

Jim seemed able to put people at ease simply by assuming an informal stance himself; Spock leaned against his desk, Weston remained taunt. "Lieutenant, standing at attention for a long period of time, particularly in high temperatures, has been known to cause dizziness." The man relaxed slightly. "Good." The data was in standard query, complete and efficiently organized. It took Spock less than five minutes to learn everything useful it had to divulge. "Weston, you've been in Security most of your career, is that so?"

"All of it, Sir. Privilege to serve." He looked at his superior's lifted brow and opted for honesty. "I get to live in space, travel for free, get paid for staying in shape and when my shift's over, it's over."

"Unlike First Officers."

"Or even Chiefs of Security." Weston grinned, "no offense, Sir, but I wouldn't trade places."

"And stands before me a wise and honest man" Spock intoned, quoting a Vulcan treatise. The at-attention stance was gone, now they could speak. "Weston, how easy would it be for someone to sabotage a weapon in the arsenal?"

"Not very damn likely," he said with vehemence, then caught himself. "Sorry, Sir." Spock nodded his understanding, Lee had been a member of Security and a weapon in their charge had killed her. Of course he would be defensive. In addition, Weston's eyes were red; and Spock had seen him at the memorial service. "Lt. Commander Voorheis and I went over the drill this morning looking for a hole and, Sir, I just don't see how they could do it. In the first place, it takes two people and two keys to open the arsenal. Then there's the procedures. We inspect the hollows before we ever charge 'em, then inspect and test before we sign 'em out, and the guy getting the phaser has to witness the tests. We go through the whole thing backwards when they come back."

"Do you ask if they've been fired?"

Weston blushed. "We do, but we don't pay any attention to what they say, lots of people can't resist squeezing off a round or two. . ."

"And you, quite reasonably, see no value in forcing them to admit to a normal human reaction."

"Not just human, Sir," He grinned, then shifted his weight uncomfortably. There was a saying in Security, an officer is an officer, and he had just forgotten the why of those words and said something dumb. Mr. Spock didn't look at all upset, though, but how would he know?

"And the power packs?"

"Anyone getting a phaser can get a pack, but hardly anyone requests them. It's just another thing to carry around."

"The packs do not receive the same scrutiny."

"Well, no. You can't do much damage with a power pack. . . ." He stopped, the details of Kennedy's death weren't common knowledge, but there had been talk and enough of it. "Aren't supposed to be able to anyway. The packs are in the arsenal, so they get the same security, only we don't bother to do all the inspection and testing every time, they get inspected and tested when the manual says they should, rest of the time we just charge 'em, make sure the charge is within the limits, check for leakage and sign 'em out."

Spock nodded, then noted the fine beading of sweat on the man's upper lip. He ought to lower the temperature to something humans found comfortable, but he was already cold. "Thank you, Weston."

"Thank you, Sir." He turned to leave, then stopped, "Sir, request permission to report this conversation to my Chief."

"You will anyway, will you not?" Spock commented absently, then chided himself. "Your pardon, that was uncalled for and unworthy. It would be your duty to make the report, by all means, do so."



There was not really any such place as the physics lab. There were place where the physics Subject Matter Experts worked. Still it did not take all that long to track down one crew woman. A helpful aide pointed his finger to a table-top scanner and a woman bent over the board. "Janice Brown?"

His second try at finding Ron's girl turned her stool around, and smiled up at him. "Yes?"

McCoy took one look in her doe brown eyes and fell in love. Tiny, she must have stood on tip-toe to make the fleet height requirements. Round, a lot of nice round places. Not one of those women who thought they should look like eighteen year old boys. Here was a woman, he just knew, who would make sausage gravy and beaten biscuits for Saturday breakfast and then take you back to bed to burn off all those calories.

"Sir? Can I help you?"

That voice, smoother than a kitten's wrist. "Ah," her hair was a tousle of brown curls, not some vain priss who spent hours making herself up. She probably liked football games, Mexican food and dark beer. "Ah, I, ah wanted to let you know that the service is going to be tomorrow morning."

"The service?" *Jim Kirk, you bastard, you did it to me again.* The love of his life looked down, pulling on her lower lip with her teeth. They were perfect pearls set in the smoothest milk chocolate he had ever eaten. "Oh, Ron I'm sorry, that's right, he was part of the landing party yesterday."

"No ma'am, I'm sorry," he said in complete insincerity. Well, maybe he should be a little easier on Jim. He was going on bad information, too. He could afford to be charitable. Janice Brown clearly was not a grieving lover, he wouldn't have to compete with a ghost. "Someone mentioned that they thought the two of you were friends and, well, I thought. . . ."

Janice shook her head, not quite a denial. "I had lunch with him and the rest of Botany all the time, until I got on this Five Point project," she gestured to the scanner and a lot of lines that did not mean anything to McCoy. "Then I got going on this and — Oh, I think someone told me he's going, well, went with someone in engineering."

McCoy had a brief but violent argument with himself — Spock won. "The truth is, Janice, I'm trying to find out who his friends were. You know, for the words. I'd hoped you might be able to help me out."

She smiled her apology, it went straight from her eyes to his heart. Compassionate, she would understand about long hours and night calls. "Well, I think I'd start with Botany, then. He thought of the world of them — them and Engineering. But especially Botany, he thought they were some sort of perfect, the way they worked out, kept their bodies and minds honed." She blushed, "he was nice enough, and for awhile I thought he was flirting with me, but I don't guess I was his type, I'm too fat."

"How could any man think that?" The words were out of his mouth and hanging in the air like a neon sign spelling out "McCoy is an idiot." Somehow, she didn't seem to be offended. She laughed.

"A lid for every jar, that's what my Pappa used to say. No, I didn't know him that well, but Ron talked about perfection, and it wasn't just talk. He worked out all the time, that and the tan tube. I'm surprised he even ate pizza, much less with the double cheese that Jones likes. All those indulgent calories must have raised hell with all his theories on purity."

"Purity?" Trained observer, McCoy, that's what you're here for.

Janice nodded, healthy crew versus officer suspicion in her eyes. "He had some crazy theories on perfection and purity and the role of man, he even went through a couple of weeks where he'd only eat white food to see if that made him any purer." Her hands came up as though to mold the words like a lump of clay. "Now that sounds mean, but I don't mean it that way. Like I said, I didn't really know him that well, but you could tell how much he loved the Fleet and serving in space. But he was still such a cadet, so full of the romance of the fleet. You've seen 'em, you know how they are their first year, some special obligation to be perfect in body and mind, so they don't disgrace the uniform."

"And thank gawd that wears off. All that sincerity wears us humans down."

"I'll say. But, well, a lot of guys talk that way when they're coming on to you, or trying to brown nose brass." Her gaze and hands lowered to her lap. She must have thought she sounded disrespectful, but whether it was the to the Fleet or to his rank he wasn't sure. "I mean, you learn that being dedicated doesn't mean that you can't enjoy a beer and a burrito."

The way guys talk when they're coming on to you. Don't blow it, Len, take your information and leave. "Well, I've kept you from your work long enough. I don't want you to get in trouble with Spock. I had just thought that you and, well. . ."

Then she smiled, "I know, but what a gentleman you are, taking the time to come here."

"Yes ma'am, an officer and a gentleman." Jeez, Len, where did you come up with that line? Thank god, she thought he was cute and laughed again. He wasn't sure where Jim got his lousy information but, all things considered, he did not think this was a totally wasted visit.



He wasn't about to go back to duty in dress blues, so Kirk had to stop at his quarters to change. As long as he was going to strip anyway, he might as well take a shower to perk himself up. And, as long as he was that close, there was no harm in checking in on Spock, see how the man was doing and get an update — especially since that was what he was planning on doing anyway.

"No offense, Spock," he said as he plopped himself into a comfortable looking chair — where was all this furniture coming from — "but you look like a sorry dog's tail."

"So I've been told." Kirk was looking hungrily at what McCoy hadn't eaten of his lunch, Spock pushed the tray in his captain's direction. "I've gone over the personnel records, new staff and transfers, for the past six months. I find nothing questionable."

The captain munched on half a sandwich. "Not much to check this time, what have we had, nine?"

"Ten, including Kennedy."

"Um," he picked up the rest of the sandwich and bit into it. "We can't have been that lucky, no one with a bad record? Any mustard to go with this?"

Spock shook his head. "Green in maintenance did not get along with his superior on the Bunker, but Klebes gives her fully acceptable ratings. Green would have no access to the arsenal corridor."

Kirk reached for the pickle, waving it around to make his point. "Ever wonder about how the fleet decides what needs guarding? I'd rather have a malcontent cleaning up the arsenal with a cadre of Security around than working unsupervised near the water supply."

Spock made a mental note to check with Hydro on their security and emergency procedures. "In any event, I can find no connection between Kennedy and Green. They lived fifteen decks apart on different lift patterns, ate in different mess halls. Green was not assigned to the Botany labs. I have not been able to trace leisure pursuits, however —"

"God," the pickle snapped, "you really meant it when you were talking murder."

As before, Spock wondered why the senior command preferred the thought of a traitor in their midst to a murderer. Statistical studies clearly showed that a majority of murderers, having gotten rid of the person who vexed them, generally settled down to normal, productive lives. "Yes, Sir, I did."

"Who in the name of all that's reasonable would want to kill Ron Kennedy? Everyone liked him."

"More accurately, no one has expressed any degree of animosity towards him." The point was not made, he tried again. "Captain, I have noted that among humans that is presumed to be friendship. The two are not synonymous."

"Maybe, but they aren't mutually exclusive, either." Kirk picked up the last item on the lunch tray, a slice of cheese. "If you're going to convince me that someone killed that kid, you're going to have to do a damn good job of presenting your evidence."



The lieutenant was correct, Kennedy's will was indeed an instructive document. So was the document history, culled from recover systems and Starfleet's opinion that if a record could be kept, it must be kept. And according to that record, Kennedy had been in the habit of updating it after landing party detail.

Scanning the differences, Spock saw a pattern of refinement with items given to males and name changes to items left to females. Amy Jackson replaced Janice Brown who replaced Meg Welling to receive a book mark and a ceramic tea set. Amy Jackson? He shook his head, the young man must have made that entry in hopeful anticipation. Amy had never mentioned the man. Robert Stokes, however, was left the same silver framed pictures and antique belt buckle, but the description had grown longer. The personal library was to be Kirk's, the size of the library grew only slightly — he made a note of the additions in case they should turn out to belong to someone else, but the titles listed by name grew with every revision; Masada, Heros of Chernoble, Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea, Patriot, Forbidden Colors.

The yoroidoshi. He had been left the dagger only recently, along with an explanation that a weapon of such history should belong to a man "who knew only starvation and noble thoughts."

Sulu saw Spock's eyebrows go up and it didn't take a lifetime of logic to figure out what he had just read. "I think he'd been reading too much Mishima, Sir."

"Mishima?"

"Yukio Mishima, he wrote at least two of those books. Sammari discipline, brotherhood of the sword, ideal male beauty and blood — like that print of St. Sebastian." He grinned, it was not often he knew more about anything than the First Officer. "Too much sepuke for me, but Ron tended to go overboard on anything he got interested in, and that sort of romantic idealism is the kind of thing Mishima was known for."

"Sepuku."

"That's the real term for it, most people know it as hari-kiri, but all that translates to is belly cut. Mishima's works are full of people killing themselves, or getting killed for love, or someone's sense of honor." Spock was looking at him, probably expecting this conversation to lead somewhere, which it wasn't. Mishima had been an important writer in his time, but that was a couple of centuries back. He had read the classic pieces, but only because it had been required reading. "If that's all, Sir."

"Yes, thank you, Lieutenant. I will see that your dagger is returned."

Sulu started to explain why he cared about it, then closed his mouth. The First was not interested. The FO had all ready turned back to his desk and whatever work he had been doing.

Spock hardly noticed the door closing, his concentration was on the will and whatever concrete information it might yield. "Nobel thoughts and starvation." It did sound rather like a quote, in any case, a strange description, in addition to being untrue.

Robert Stokes was one of the ship's fitness consultants. Jim commented often enough that Kennedy was working out, perfecting his body for an ever changing series of sports. Perhaps Stokes was a source.



It did not take very long to find Meg Welling. Jim might have been wrong about most of the details, but he was right about Meg. She was in communications and she worked third shift, slept first. He tried the door signal and was debating trying it again when it slid back.

"Doctor McCoy?" She stared up at him in that complete astonishment that only the newly wakened can manage. Where Amy was voluptuous and Janice was, well Janice was perfect, Meg was a solid athlete, at least from what he could see. And he could see quite a lot until she wrapped the sides of her robe around her and tied the belt. "Come in." She did not sound as though she meant it, but follow he did. A small light bloomed in the common area, she glanced off to the sleeping room and dialed the light down a notch. Then she yawned, a big gaping yawn that told McCoy that she took dental hygiene seriously. "You want some coffee?" When he shook his head no, she looked relieved. She probably didn't have any to offer.

McCoy looked at her. She was not the type you apologized to unless you meant it, so his "sorry to wake you" went unsaid. Well, then, be direct. "I've come about Ron Kennedy." Her reaction was all he could have hoped for, but not at all what he expected.

"What did that little scum sucker tell you."

"I ah, I'd been told the two of you were, close?"

She leaned forward until her nose was a foot from his face. "I am not, I repeat not, his girl friend, his ex-girl friend, or anything else that requires the use of a possessive pronoun."

She looked furious and was clearly strong enough to belt his front teeth down his throat. Wait a minute, he was the officer here. "Crew woman, sit down and calm yourself." She sat back, but did not look like she was putting any effort into the calm part. "Now, you want to go someplace and talk about this?" A grunt that could have passed for affirmative or negative, then —

"I'll put something on."

While he cooled his heels in the corridor, McCoy rolled his eyes heavenward and wondered how he had gotten into this. It wasn't as though he did not have a real job waiting for him back at sickbay. Ron Kennedy. He'd told Jim these girls had been his ladies, his lovers. As far as he could see, this guy hadn't had sex, he'd had lunch. And this Meg. Well.

"Okay." Meg appeared at his elbow, the door closed behind her. She looked a little more domestic, or rather a little less feral than she had, now dressed in tights, athletic shoes and an oversized t-shirt. The t-shirt announced that the wearer was a member of the last Starfleet cross-country ski team. He didn't doubt that it was her shirt, not a gift. "Let's just walk, okay, Sir?"

"That's fine, you pick the direction, I'll ask the questions." She took off, not surprisingly, for the rec deck and the track. Now that he could see her, he decided she was not quite the serpent he had thought. Athletic, yes, probably why she kept her black hair cropped so short, but really very very pretty. And a man would have to be a fool not to know what fun a woman with strong thighs could be. "So, I take it you knew Ron Kennedy."

"Yeah, I knew him," she squatted down, stretching out her ham strings. "Once, about five months back."

"You want to talk about it?"

She looked him straight in the eye, nice eyes, steel gray and clear, no more like pewter. Actually very attractive. "Look, I know he's dead, and I'm sorry, but he was the most persistent pest."

"I take it the reports of your affair were exaggerated?"

She laughed, it was like Jim's ironic laugh and sounded just like it. "When he came on board he started to hang around with the volley ball teams after practice. He was a rotten player, never got any better." There was a pause while she checked the direction for the track. "He was trying though, I'll grant him that. Worked on stamina and anaerobics, control, the works. That's how I met him, you get to know the ones who are serious about keeping fit. Anyway, at one of the pizza nights, you know how people talk about all kinds of things, well, we got to talking about first experiences."

"First experiences?"

"Yeah, first times."

"Oh." McCoy trotted along beside for a moment, wishing he were in better shape and that he had on other shoes. "And. . ."

"Well, I'm a sucker for lost children and small animals so I took him home and gave him a mercy fuck."

The idea of Meg taking pity on anything took a couple of minutes to assimilate, but then again, she had slowed up a half mile back when she heard his heavy breathing. Then it hit, "you mean he was a virgin?"

"Hard to believe, isn't it?" She grinned, "he wasn't any better at sex than he was at volleyball, but who is, their first time?" Then she did something that seemed completely out of character. She blushed, not some maidenly coy pink cheeks, bright red embarrassment that burns your ears. "Oh god, I forgot he's dead."

"It's okay, Meg. People don't turn into saints when they die."

"But he's not around to tell his side of it. That isn't fair. I'm going to have to see things from his side of it."

Another couple of joggers passed them, the taller one glancing back at what must be a very strange sight. The CMO in duty tunic and boots running alongside a pocket Venus. He grinned himself, in the last five minutes he had gone from disliking Meg Welling to thinking she was one hell of a girl. He could almost hear Spock's voice telling him to stop being a flirt and start being an officer. Besides, he was in love with Janice Brown. "So, what happened."

"Look, I told you it was mercy fuck, and that's what I told him, too. But he got the idea it was something more and started hanging around."

"Yeah, and he was the most persistent pest." He said, using her own words.

"He was that. He'd be there when I worked out, I mean at the locker room door before and after, sat and watched me practice, followed me to my quarters, met me at the door when I went on duty. Ate his meals when I did. Told people, including my lover, that I was his girl." She shuddered, "I finally told him that if he didn't leave me alone I was going to the captain and pressing charges for harassment. That did it. He started going with, what was her name? Janice Brown?"

"Sounds right," he mumbled.

"I don't know if he did it because I was his first, or he really liked me or if he just wanted to go back to bed." She turned around and started running backwards. "He was such a total romantic I guess it was because I was his first. Couldn't bear the idea that it was just something physical, everything had to be so perfect and pure. Poor kid."

It was hard to think up questions, much less ask them when your lungs are on fire. "Well, if he stopped bothering you, why are you still so mad?"

The look he got could have stripped paint off the hull. "He told everyone he dumped me. I mean, first I had tell everyone we weren't lovers, then I had to put up with everyone feeling sorry for me because I'd been dropped." She laughed, "Me, dropped. I don't get dropped."

"I believe you. Do you think it could have ever worked, between you two?"

"No." She turned back around and started running forward again. "No, he was just too self-centered, all fantasy and romance. He was going to be the head of botany, he was going to make all fleet volley ball team, he even thought he was going to be a starship captain. Not ambition, nothing to do with reality, just fantasy and romance. And crazy ideas about perfection and purity. You know he actually went a week eating only white food because he wanted to cleanse his inner self? Other than that he was nice enough I suppose, easy to get along with. He'd go along with anything you wanted on a pizza."

"So the phony romance, that was all?"

"It's enough. Look, Doctor, I work third shift. They call it "the veil" for a reason. Then there he is, spreading it around the ship that I was his girl. His girl, can you imagine? Who uses words like that anymore?"

McCoy said he didn't know.



There had not been many answers in the stars today, and the ones Spock was giving him were not the kind he wanted to hear. "Rand, get me some lunch."

"Yes, Sir."

He was not hungry, that sandwich in Spock's quarters had taken care of that, but he needed Rand out of his way for awhile. "And take your time getting it." She looked at him with that wounded doe look that made him want to smack her. A captain's yeoman should learn to work with the captain, he should not have to tip-toe around her feelings. That young woman was either going to have make some fast changes, or find another position.

As soon as she was gone, Kirk felt sorry. She was hard working and god knows, eager to please. She just did not seem to belong in deep space. He could see her doing just fine with some grandfatherly big wig at Central — someone that did not mind being catered to and admired all day. But deep spacers were like Kennedy, there for the challenge, the adventure.

Kennedy. He leaned back in his chair and stared at the ceiling. Well, Ron, I told you mother a lot of things in that letter. I told her how dying in space isn't dying far from home for people like us. I told her it was like dying at home — because it was home and more to us. I hope to God I was right, if you couldn't have a long life, I hope it was at least a meaningful death.

There was another report on his desk this afternoon. The planetary survey for Laurel III, done by the second crew. Someday there would be a colony there, and maybe later cities. There'd be cities and roads named for those first colonists, but there would not be anything named for Kennedy. People being what they were, they'd never think back before they landed. Someone should remember the Kennedys and Lees. Someone had to.



Stokes come promptly, but reeking of reluctance. Like most of the enlisted, he could not conceive of any reason why senior command would talk to crew that didn't mean trouble. He was genuinely surprised, and more than a little taken back to find that the reason was Ron Kennedy — that Ron had remembered him in his will. The interview was proving to be a waste of time and energy, neither of which were in abundance. Stokes did not seem to know anything of Kennedy and his associates other than that Kennedy showed more enthusiasm than skill in an ever changing string of endeavors. "It wasn't like I was a close friend or anything, I was just doing my job."

"Perception varies with one's vantage point, does it not?"

Robert rubbed at the back of his neck and shook his head. "I was just doing my job."

"Still, these gifts seem somewhat, personal."

That brought the man's head up with snap. "He wasn't my lover, Sir."

Spock controlled his own reaction to a blink. It was a possibility he had not considered. Still, such a protestation generally meant there was more involved, Spock sighed inwardly and decided to continue the conversation, then he nodded to a chair, and sat himself. He needed to get off his feet, and he knew it. While he pondered the directions his next question could take, Stokes adjusted himself in his seat, then like most humans, uncomfortable with silence, started to talk.

"Not recently anyway, well, not like that, anyway. I mean, he was a good looking man, and I'm no different than most, I can go either way. But Kennedy, he was just women."

"Crewman, I meant no insult." He did not want to discuss Stokes or Kennedy's sex life, particularly in light of that odd quotes context. Who Ron Kennedy had admired was something he was rather counting on McCoy for that sort of information, but Stokes would not be denied.

"All I ever did was help him with his workouts. I would never use my job to. . . like that."

It seemed important to Stokes that he understand, in fact, he thought he did understand. "Ethics."

"I've got to touch people in order to do my job right, like a barber — the guy who cuts your hair has to touch you. And if the crew doesn't feel comfortable having me touch them, I'm out of work."

"Logical."

This time Stokes took the hint and stood up. "Well, excuse me, Sir, I should get back to my post." He stood, drained off the water Spock had poured for him and started to turn. "It's weird though, we talked about it — sex — once but you know, I think he was disappointed in himself? Like it was some personal failing and he wanted to be perfect."



Botany ought to smell like moist ferns and flowers, at the very least it should smell like dirt, but Sharp's department smelled like desiccant and fertilizer. That always bothered McCoy — he had made his peace with sickbay smelling like disinfectant years ago, but damn it, botany should smell like a garden.

It didn't, it smelled like someone was trying to grow one and trying to kill one at the same time. The staff was not much different. They were working, forcefully cheerful and obviously depressed as hell. Not that he blamed them, someone who worked along side them was never going to sign in for duty again.

"Leonard," The head of botany called to him and waved him into his office. McCoy smiled and followed. He knew Bill Sharp — he knew all the officers - but he and Bill had never called each other by their first names before. But then again, he had never wandered into Botany the day after a staff death before either. Fleet professionalism notwithstanding, Sharp probably figured there was no reason to upset his staff any more than necessary, like pointing out the man who had autopsied your colleague was walking through the door. Leonard might be a friend, right now, Doctor McCoy was not.

"Coffee?"

He did not want any, but said he did. "Any cream?"

"Thought you took it black." Bill rummaged in the cupboard and came up with an aged packet of lightener.

"I think I will." He reached out and accepted the cup, wondering what Spock would make of this instance on offering a beverage. How many cups had been thrust in his hand so far this shift? "Today been horrible or merely unproductive?"

"Probably some of each. Not much chatter, not much real work, but this month's reports will be in on time." Bill Sharp was a large man, always fighting the Fleet's weight restrictions, working off every bite of food with swimming, running and hand-to-hand. It had not made him slender, it had made him massive. Most ships had botanists who looked like lily stems. Enterprise had one who looked like an oak. It rubbed off on the rest of the department — when Security played the Tree Huggers it was a hell of a volley ball game. Bill poured himself a cup, studied the sweetener for a minute then pushed it back with reluctance. Resigned, he shoved a chair sideways to sit next to McCoy, not across from him. "What can I do for you?"

"Kennedy." He had been expecting a five minute bout of idle chatter before they could get down to business, Sharp's directness was refreshing and appreciated. "I'm trying to find someone to say the words — no one's come forward, which isn't all that unusual. A lot of people are uncomfortable with death, but I thought someone in your department would know who I should ask."

Bill's face crinkled like a wilted pumpkin and he shook his head. "You'd think that, wouldn't you, but no one's said a thing about it. They all say he was okay, easy to get along with and they're sorry he died but frankly Doctor, it sounds like all the dead are noble."

The coffee was no better than sickbay's but McCoy drank it anyway. He would probably have to douse himself for a sour stomach later. "That isn't much help."

"I know. How about Amy Jackson?"

"Tried her. Seems that was a one-way romance."

Bill sighed and shook his head, "I'm not surprised. Ron had a way of making a smile into a commitment, and he was big on fantasy. You know, couldn't tell asthma from passion? I know Meg didn't think much of him, despite what he said." An uncomfortable expression, followed by an uncomfortable silence. "Well, that was my fault. I was the one that teased him about being a virgin. I suppose Jan was another wistful thought?"

"Well, a man can hope, can't he?"

"He can, but he's better off taking action. You ever see him alive?" McCoy shook his head, no. Exams didn't count, he didn't remember anyone's face after 430 physicals. "Good looking kid, easy to get along with. He didn't have to make up stories about women, but I honest to god think he preferred it that way."

"If it's not real, you can't really fail?"

"Maybe, maybe he just liked romance more than he liked sex." The head of Botany sat for a minute then picked up both their cups. "Jones, Cloud, Steward — time for a break."

McCoy followed the four of them, feeling a little like the smallest duck in the nest. Kennedy had not been much taller than Jim and weighed in ten pounds less, how had he gotten along with these gladiators? They went down the corridor and settled into seats around a table that looked accustomed to their weight.

"Kennedy," Sharp said, "the three of you know everything about everything else, what can you tell me about Ron?"

The trio looked ill at ease, glancing back and forth, never meeting each other's eyes. Death did that to people — killed or crippled a lot of relationships that just touched on the one who was gone. McCoy wondered how long, if ever, before that group would feel comfortable with each other again. He got up and found himself an errand on the far side of the tiny room, he dumped out his cup, rinsed it and filled it with water from a sink that was doing double duty as a plant mister. Having given them as much time as he could, he resumed his seat. "This is a big ship, with a big crew," he began, "and just because you work with someone doesn't mean they're your off-duty buddies." Three heads bobbed in relieved agreement. "Maybe Ron mentioned someone he met after shift, or maybe someone stopped by regularly — anything you can tell me could help, even if it's negative."

"Well," Steward said. "He was really easy to get along with, and he came along with anything the department did."

"Except volleyball, he wasn't much good at that." Linda Cloud blew on her coffee like a sigh, little ripples moving across the surface. "But we nearly always ate lunch together, you know, whoever was ready for break, we just all go as a group. Ron was always in on that."

"That's natural enough, I know that's what we do in sickbay." It wasn't, they hardly ever got to eat a meal sitting down when they were on duty. There was always something going on, but they would have eaten together if they could, it was just the way humans are.

"Yeah, he was easy to get along with, whatever you wanted on pizza was fine with him."

"Easy to get along with, as long as you didn't borrow anything from him. All his stuff had to be perfect." McCoy didn't miss the emphasis on "his". Jones shook his head. "I think all I can give you is negatives, Doctor. I mean, we all liked him okay but Ron, well, he wasn't a botanist. He didn't even really want to be here. It wasn't that he disliked botany," the heads all bobbed again — this time including Sharp's, "I think he really wanted to be in engineering. That's where his latest lady, Amy Jackson, was. Or maybe Command, didn't he take the CPA?"

"Signed up for it," Sharp told his cup.

"He'd have liked botany all right if we had a seat on the bridge," Steward muttered.

That brought reactions, everyone looked disapprovingly at Al Steward, as though he had just let out a cherished secret. "Oh?"

"Sorry."

"No," Jones broke in, "Al's just telling the truth, Ron wanted to be in space, hell, we all do, that's why we're here and he'd have done anything to get here. I'll bet you cash credits he was a botanist mate

because it was his best shot at getting deep space duty. He didn't want in on the exploration, he wanted in on the adventure."

"Well, there's nothing wrong with that." Cloud protested, "I mean, that's why none of us are research scientists for AgBase."

Jones shook his head, "No, not the same thing. He was self centered and he was a cowboy. I mean, you know how he was, coming in with his phaser and power pack before every beam down to show off."

"He just wanted a little attention. Would it have hurt any of us to have given it to him?"



"Talk about depressing — that poor kid," Bones commented later, "seems like everyone I talk to assumed he was friends with someone else. They all say the same thing, 'he was easy to get along with', all of 'em. They only thing I know for sure is that he'd eat anything on a pizza. Sharp'll do the service if he has to, but I'd still like to get someone who was a friend."

"Hadn't the captain suggested a . . . "

"Yeah, but they all turned out to be bad leads. I think he had a tendency to, well, exaggerate."

"Exaggerate?" He rolled off the bed and pulled his tunic into place. It hurt to move, but there was no point in complaining. He could not give the impression that he needed to be in bed. "For what purpose?"

"You can't be that dense." He shook his head. "Haven't you ever made up stories about a night with a woman?"

"I have never needed to," was the honest response.

God it felt good to laugh. "Spock, in anyone else I'd say that was the biggest brag I'd ever heard." Nice work, McCoy, he's going to be so cooperative now. He turned to the desk and poked around, looking for something to change the subject. "What's this?"

"A time-line detailing Kennedy's movements prior to beam down."

"Called to landing party duty, 0912, signed out phaser 0931 — what's this question mark?"

"A two minute water run at 0939 in the cabin."

"So, he took a shower, what's the question?"

"You assume he took a shower."

"Well, who else would have — oh." Maybe a murderer trying to get some kind of evidence off himself. "So, how's the hip?"

"My hip?"

"Don't tell me you haven't noticed?" McCoy shook his head, "you've got a bruise the size of a dinner plate on your right hip and thigh. Looks like you landed on it." Spock's hand went to his side, fingers exploring the area. "It was pretty spectacular last time I saw it — by now you should be able to charge admission for a look-see."

"Fortunately, my finances do not require such drastic measures." His fingers found the parameters of the tender spot, McCoy was prone to exaggerate, but this time he had not. It was discomforting to have so vivid a reminder of an incident he could not remember. "If you have not found anyone who claimed to be a friend, have you found anyone who might be an enemy?"

McCoy mentally squirmed. He hadn't, and he had not tried very hard. "No."

"No jealous colleague? A personal relationship gone bad?"

"Nope. Everyone sounded like custard at room temperature, absolutely neutral." Was that a lie? "Well, Meg Welling could have done without his attentions."

"Hmmm."

This was as horrible as he thought it would be. Everything he said was going to get turned into evidence for or against someone. "You get any sleep this afternoon?"

"Some."

"Some isn't enough." Actually, his number one patient concern was not doing that badly. "Your metabolism is getting back to normal, wish I could take credit for it." He checked the dressing and found it snug and dry, someone had obviously just changed it, what was under it was doing nicely as well. He should have done this while Spock was on the bed. Why had he let him get up, anyway? "And your back is about as pretty as a baby's hinder. I can, and will take credit for that. You'll be ready for rehab by Wednesday. If you can stand all the water, I'd like you to start whirlpool in the morning."

"No one, besides Ms. Welling, expressed any animosity towards Kennedy in any way?"

McCoy wondered if he had just heard evasion, agreement or dismissal. Spock had definite ideas on the medical treatment of Vulcans and they did not always coincide with his own. "Meg off the hook?"

"Meg was never on 'the hook'. The morning of the landing party, Crewwoman Welling was still on duty — she and first shift backup were reassembling the auxiliary comm unit."

"Jeez," he sat back and looked at Spock as though he'd grown antlers. "How the hell did you track that down so fast?"

Spock returned the look. "As first officer, it is my duty to be fully briefed on the status of the bridge and auxiliary. Is there anything else?"

"Naw. Look, I'm not reporting anything because I just don't have anything to report. The worst I found were that his staff mates were a little dissatisfied with him, he wasn't a botanist, just using it to get into deep space."

"Interesting."

If they could get that headache licked Spock could start eating, then all he would have to worry about was the overload on his system when his body started the real cleanup from all that cell disruption. Flu-like symptoms, for a day or two. But that was just messy - it wasn't dangerous, as long as he didn't let himself get dehydrated. "Yeah, they're all really dedicated to exploration and plant research. He was just along for the ride and they resented it a little."

"And compounded by a great deal of attention from the Captain. Go on."

Spock was indicating an empty chair and looking up at him with receptive attention. "Well now, I guess resentment is too strong a word. Want something for that headache? No, it wasn't a question." He leaned forward and gave the injection. "Don't worry, I can't give you any more of that stuff until morning. Anyway, they just didn't understand him. For that group a planet survey is where they got the samples and data. The real fun was figuring it out. For Kennedy, the data was a something you had to do if you wanted to get to be part of a landing party. He was a cowboy, you know, the kind of guy who gets a hard on when you say 'prepare to beam down'."

"I know the type." He had thought Command was the only department afflicted with them.

"Results management," McCoy commented, "you know what they tell us, don't worry about the motivation, worry about the results."

"You and I are talking because of motivation."

"Yeah." He preferred not to think about that, but he was pretty certain Spock had written him off as a dead loss when it came to investigation. "Well, I'm going to try his roommate, probably should have started with him anyway. Now, give that shot time to work and don't do any more screen work until after dinner — which I'll bring you after I talk with Ed Jenkins."



James Kirk finished up the shift on the bridge, he always started and ended the shift where a captain damn well ought to be. But as soon as the relief crew piled out of the lift he was on his way down.

He trotted through the corridors like a man with a destination. If anyone noticed that the ship's captain could not wait to leave the bridge, they'd put it down to work or a woman. Fair enough, since ship's rep was that her captain was a ladies' man, he shook his head in dismay. Not that he minded being thought of as a demon lover, truth was truth after all, but no captain worthy of the name messed around with the crew, it was completely unprofessional, and against the regs. Still, he was not above taking advantage of the rumors when it worked to his advantage.

"Come" Spock's voice called.

"What have you got for me?" Spock held his hand up, a silent request for a moment's delay. Kirk looked around the now brightly lit room. His friend normally kept his quarters dim. One of the things he had always meant to do was read up on Vulcan etiquette, maybe the dim room was the way to greet a guest. Whatever, the room was office bright now, and its occupant was concentrating on the computer screen in front of him. Spock was wearing a look of absorbed concentration that Kirk had seen before. It was almost a trance — he'd probably already forgotten he was there. "You look a little more human than you did this

afternoon." He said it on purpose, trying to get Spock's attention and ease whatever pressure he had heaped on himself. It was guaranteed to work, and it did.

"On Vulcan, it is considered bad form to insult a man in his own home." The unit clicked and whirred, backing up and storing Spock's work. "However, since this is Starfleet's roof, not mine, I suppose I must endure such comments." Spock gestured towards a pot of coffee and a pitcher of chah. The captain had been trying to develop a taste for the stuff ever since he'd discovered it was de rigueur at Vulcan functions. "We have a few answers, and more questions."

"Let's start with the answers." He poured a cup of chah for both of them, a full tumbler for Spock and a little splash for himself. "How are you feeling? You look like hell and anyone getting you dinner?"

"McCoy will be by later," Spock replied, supplying the one answer that would meet with approval. "Simply put, we have concluded that Kennedy's power pack had been tampered with. Lee's was standard equipment fully meeting specifications."

The first of those yes/no questions. Well, the equipment malfunction was deliberate, next question was whether Kennedy was the intended victim, or convenient or accidental. He sipped his drink, it still tasted like spiced water, Spock blamed it on the reconstituted stuff he was restricted to on ship. Made fresh, he defended, it was much richer and more flavorful.

"No surprises there."

"No, it was exactly what we thought to find. Further, we have found the tampering was minimal and amateurish." He picked up a half disassembled pack and leaned forward. "You can see the marks here and here where drain poles were added. The poles themselves burnt out, but the corrosion remains. Without a more detailed analysis I can not tell you what the leads were, but the poles themselves were energy sensitive filaments — the type used for fuses."

"A simple Finney." It probably wasn't worth the time to track down the leads. Finding an answer that did not get you any closer to what you really needed to know was a waste of time.

"Yes." Spock nodded, pleased that the motion no longer blurred his vision. He was much stronger than the morning. If only he could get rid of the headache.

Kirk was scanning the ground reports. He had read them all at least ten times but he couldn't help hoping he had missed something. "All right, why amateur? Sounds like a fast effective method to me."

"It is simple to install," Spock agreed, "but the casing was so obviously pried apart, and . . ." he pointed to the score marks on the sides, "easy to spot."

"It worked with Kennedy, didn't it?"

"It worked with Kennedy."

The human put the empty cup down. He'd only poured a small amount of chah but he had downed it like a good boy, now he could have coffee. "Why didn't Security see it?"

"Security did see it, when it was returned to them. In all probability, it was not there for them to see when Kennedy signed it out."

The coffee was worse than the chah. "I read the report, but packs don't get the same kind of attention phasers do, are we sure?"

"This was not a large landing party, and only Kennedy checked out a power pack. It seems reasonable." He looked at his captain. "I am confident."

"Then it happened between the time he checked out his equipment and the time he died."

"I have already begun the time line." Spock refilled his tumbler and speculated on how long it might be before McCoy came by with dinner. It was an unworthy thought given the investigation, but he had not eaten since breakfast the day before. "I believe we can narrow the time to between sign out and beam down. Kennedy was in my group, and within my sight the entire time."

"But you don't remember that."

"Lee's tricorder confirms it, my alternative is to believe Kennedy handed his power pack over to a third party in my presence."

Kirk sighed in reluctant agreement. If anything had happened like that Spock or Lee would have stopped things right there until they were satisfied that everything was 100% in order — he'd been on enough landing parties with them to know they followed procedures when it came to weapons. "So, where does that leave us?"

"Investigating the twenty nine minutes between the time he signed out the equipment and reported to the transporter room."

"Not a very big time window. You should be able to do it."

"Should. Assuming the leads and fuses were manufactured ahead, and five minutes to make the actual alterations, it still leaves enough time, at least theoretically, to go almost anywhere on this ship." He drew a deep breath, the scent and taste of chah in the air, held it, then exhaled slowly. He still felt sick. "This supports the supposition that Kennedy was killed by design."

"Shit." Well, he told Spock he had better have his ducks in a row, and looks like he did. The captain shook his head. "You'd have to be one hell of a cold blooded murderer to kill a man by remote control." Spock lifted a brow in silent comment. "Okay, photon torpedoes aside. Rigging a man's equipment then waiting for a phaser blast within a discreet distance. Spock, that's a lot of planning, a lot of preparation. It takes one hell of a lot of motivation and patience to do away with a man that way."

"I know."

"And what if the phaser never got fired? You'd have to get the equipment and fix it before Kennedy could turn it back in."

"Indeed."

Kirk stood up, sat down and stood up again. Spock watched, understanding the frustration of a man accustomed to action and denied any outlet. The captain of the Enterprise did a great many things exceedingly well, doing nothing was not among them. "You were going to ask me why this precludes a saboteur."

"No, hell, I can see it." He sat down, poured himself a full cup of coffee and drained it to give himself time to put his thoughts in order, an order he could verbalize. "It would be a pretty stupid saboteur to be so damn visible. But, Spock, it means a pretty stupid killer, too."

"Or an uninformed one."

"Which should make him easier to catch."

"Or her."

"God I hate this." The pot was almost empty, the last drops splattered out before the cup was a third full. "I hate this and I want it over, but more than that, I want it done right." He scowled into the cup, dark and clear without being clean. "Keep up whatever line of questioning makes the most sense and the hell with what I want." He tossed the rest of the cup down and made a face. "Who brought you this stuff?"

"McCoy."



"Personal effects, Ronald Jasper Kennedy, Service number 194-484-512." Weston stopped the 'corder and looked at McCoy, "I can witness and catalog, Sir, but if Jenkins can pack and I catalog this could go a lot faster if you wouldn't mind. . ."

"Fine, I'll witness." His timing was either really good or really rotten, but he could not do anything about that now. You can't reschedule a spontaneous visit. Just his luck he walked in on the catalog and storage procedure. Oh well, it probably was easier on Ed to have a couple of people around. The poor kid was rattled enough, at least according to his lady, and pawing through a dead man's things tended to bring out the superstitions in people, even rational Starfleet chemist types. "Ed, unless you'd like me to — "

"Oh, no, this is fine. I mean, he was my roommate and all. I've seen all this stuff before."

Weston opened up a crate and set it on the bed. "Good, 'cause it's likely there's some stuff here he borrowed from you or some other crewman, you see anything you don't think was his, just let me know and we'll sort it out, make sure it gets back."

Bless you, Lt. Sulu, McCoy thought. What a graceful way to handle that.

Ed shrugged, "I can't remember him ever borrowing anything from me. He liked things really perfect, you know? My stuff was always too beat up or dirty for him." He opened the first drawer and looked down in dismay. "What a mess. He must have had one hell of a party before he left. So much for Mr. Perfect Order." Ed flushed and dropped his hands to his side. "Sorry, that's not very respectful."

McCoy peered over his shoulder, a tube of personal lubricant had leaked out over everything. 'Light Blue Goo' they called it. It was good stuff, but not what you hoped someone would find in your drawer after you died. "Don't worry about it, son, I think Ron would agree that's a mess. Probably didn't get the cap on right." Ed began to pick up items gingerly, trying to find dry corners.

"Lt. Weston, will we be able to clean that before we send it home?" No mother needs to see that stuff smeared over her son's shorts.

"I'll check, Sir. We're allowed to launder at least what's in the sack, don't think the regs restrict when it has to be in the sack."

That was the right answer, McCoy rewarded him with a smile and a nod. Security seemed to thrive on Command approval. He knew this one, though, hadn't he been on the clean up? Yeah, he had. And here he was doing the inventory. What was it that Spock said about requiring a faith in coincidence he did not possess? "How's the arsenal testing getting on?"

Weston looked at him, blinked a couple of times then shrugged his massive shoulders. "'Bout done with it. That's eight pairs of black socks, nine pairs of white, right?"

So, he was part of the team. "Pretty fast work."

"No reason it shouldn't be. There's procedures for testing, all we have to do is follow 'em. No, wait Jenkins, how 'bout we start another crate and line it, those are real books, let's take care of 'em right."

Both Leonard and Ed looked at Weston with respect. People didn't normally credit Security with much sensitivity.

"Yeah, Ron, he really loved those books." Ed stopped for a minute to chew on his lip and study his boot tips. McCoy almost choked up too over the first real emotion he had seen anyone give Ron's memory. "He was always reading something, new stuff all the time and these," he picked up the first volume, "he said he just worked his way through the collection then started over again. Here's where he stopped." Jenkins poked around the shelf, looking for something. "That's weird, he must have just finished one book and hadn't had time to start the next."

"What?"

"His book mark," he held up a slender silver chain with a deep space cruiser in silhouette. Leather bound copies of Hornblower, Mishima, Clancy, Zuk, Kl-arez in perfect order waiting to tell tales of high seas, sacrifice and heroics. "He never stopped reading, even if it was just the first page." He touched the chain, "that's almost too ironic."



The poor guy must have been starving, McCoy thought as he watched Spock tuck into a meal he thought was going to feed them both. He should have remembered, Spock always seemed to react to injury with increased appetite — his fast healing flesh demanding vast amounts of fuel to do its work. And the guy would stay thin. Himself, he hadn't been able to eat like that since he was a first year resident.

"Ed Jenkins, the roommate, will say the words. At least I can report that to Jim. Come to think of it, where is the captain?"

Spock stopped chewing long enough to answer. "I suggested he would be happier with my report if he allowed me more time to gather information."

"And he agreed?"

"Eventually." McCoy had chosen the meal well, complex carbohydrates and complete proteins were exactly what he needed now. The man was an excellent doctor, why did it always surprise him when shown proof of what he already knew? "That both Voorheis and I see little, if any, danger to the ship as a whole did a great deal to placate him."

"You mean you're still convinced someone had it out for Kennedy?"

"Yes."

"I believe I'd have paid money to see Jim's reaction." Immediately embarrassed by his own reaction, Leonard fussed his tricorder and cursed himself. Not only was it a coarse thing to say, it was true. "Do you have any ideas who might have?"

"Perhaps."

Normally Spock's one word answers annoyed him, but today his motivation was obvious — his attention was on dinner and he wanted to use his mouth for eating, not talking. Besides, whether he had anything concrete or not, Spock would tell him what that was about when he was ready to, and not a moment before. *Stupid*, he thought, *of course the man isn't going to tell you before he talks to Jim*. Any feelings of irritation faded away. Spock nearly always had damn good reasons for doing what he did, why was he so quick to assume he was being obstinate instead of logical? "Noble thoughts and starvation, eh?" Spock's head came up at that. "I read the will, too. Don't worry your secret's safe with me."

Spock turned his attention back to his dinner, wondering how much else McCoy knew. He had looked up the quote — another of Mishima's books, *Forbidden Colors*. The description was probably meant to be flattering, it had been in the book, but it offended his sense of privacy that Kennedy had looked at him in such a manner — and had recorded it. Such opinions should be kept to oneself.

"Well anyway, I'm glad I got that taken care of. A man should have a friend say his words and for awhile this morning I wasn't sure I was going to find one. Spock I know this sort of thing might not mean anything to you, but it's enough to tear a human up. Even Ed didn't seem to know him very well, and he'd roomed with him for the whole year that kid had been on board. Said he was 'easy to like', talked about Ron and how he paled around with the botany group, except I know the botany group just sort of tolerated him. And his girl friends, if you listen to Ed, you'd think Ron had been the greatest stud since James T., but his big affairs with Amy Jackson and Janice Brown meant sitting at the same lunch table. Meg took him to bed 'cause she felt sorry for him, but not sorry enough to take him twice."

Spock swallowed and set down his fork. "Not quite the life we have been lead to believe he had."

"He isn't the first guy to make up stories about girls, ah, women." He looked at Spock and grinned. "Now that I think about it, maybe your comment this afternoon was a brag after all." The Vulcan's eyebrows started a ceilingward climb, "No, I guess you wouldn't."

"A gentleman does not discuss such things."

"Well that narrows the hell out of your life." He leaned forward, bracing his elbows on his knees and lacing his hands. "Well, anyway, people are paying a lot more attention to him now that he's dead. Botany is all gut twisted guilt — seems Ron stopped by on his way to the transporter, showing off and all

excited about the landing party and I guess they pretty much ignored him. When you snub someone and it's the last time you see them alive it kinda. . . what's wrong?"

"On his way to the transporter — how did they know this?"

"Beats me, why don't you ask Sharp?"

"An excellent suggestion." He pushed the tray aside and reached for the intercom.



Sharp had been in the First's quarters fairly often, often enough to notice the new furniture. He also knew Spock, his captain and fleet regulations well enough to put the pieces together. "So," he commented as soon as the door closed, "it's not a routine investigation."

Spock didn't bother to answer, "I understand that Kennedy stopped by Botany before beam down. I am looking for confirmation and any details."

Sharp settled himself in the largest chair, which still seemed too small to hold him. "Yeah, he was by all right, must have been about 0950, not more than a minute after." He stared at his hands a moment, then looked at the Vulcan. "There's a lot of reasons why humans notice things, sometimes our reasons are pretty petty."

"The motivation is irrelevant."

"Well, just so you know. Kennedy was, he played for attention in ways that most of us outgrow before we finish school. If he was on a landing party he always stopped by on the way to the transporter room on some trumped up excuse. He wanted us to see him with a phaser."

Spock nodded, it was consistent with the young man's character. As McCoy said, he was a "cowboy", caught up in imagined self-importance he would parade his status, seeking acknowledgement and validation from others. "You are certain he had both the phaser and power pack?"

"Oh yes, he kept touching the pack. Not showing off, more like he wanted to make sure it was still there." Sharp shook his head, "At the time we were all just irritated. Now, well, you feel sorry for the guy. There he was, turned out in his best uniform. All he wanted was for us to give him a little attention, make a little fuss over him and wish him luck. It wouldn't have hurt us any, I mean, we just ignored him out of spite, now it's too late."

"Best uniform?"

"Yeah," Sharp looked at the deck, "he always showered and changed before a landing mission. I know, most of us in Botany save a beat up set just to wear for planet surveys, hell it's going to get sweaty and stained, but Kennedy, well, landing parties were a big treat for him."

That was the answer. Spock now knew where Kennedy had been, and what he had done in those twenty nine minutes between weapons checkout and beam down. It would take only a confirmation of the laundry sack to complete his work. "Thank you, Lt. Sharp. I will need a brief report detailing the estimated

time of Kennedy's arrival in Botany along with the fact that he had changed clothing and was wearing the power pack and phaser."

Sharp sketched a salute to the back of Spock's head. The First was already calling in McCoy. The man looked exhausted and it was pretty obvious his day was far from over. Command, who needs it?



Getting a call this late was something McCoy ought to be used to, god knows he had gotten enough of them. Not many people in the corridors, none of them said anything, just nods. McCoy palmed the door signal, not really sure why he did. He had been in Spock's quarters about a dozen times in the last thirty six hours, he had not knocked before. Well, he hadn't been summoned before either. The door slid back, a little dark inside. Spock rose to his feet when he entered a sign that McCoy long ago learned meant bad news. He always managed to convey "parade rest" even when he was standing in line at mess, but that was a shop window display he put on for the junior officers. Among the senior staff he acted a little more like he could bend at places other than the hips. This, now this was at-attention, and McCoy knew that he meant it as an apology. And behind the carefully controlled face McCoy was sure he could see an expression every doctor wears at one time or another — don't kill the messenger.

Damn it, why did that always make him want to start an argument? "Well, you didn't call me here for the two of us to stand around looking at each other," he sat down and leaned his elbows on the chair arms. "What's the verdict?"

Verdict. Spock considered the word, harsh but appropriate. He nodded agreement and began. "My presentation is in two parts. First I shall deal with the simpler matter, the mechanics of Ron Kennedy's death. After your questions, I shall proceed to the conclusions of my investigation."

The unit was set to display and Spock brought up a series of diagrams, with his back to McCoy. In that relative privacy he drew a steadying breath. McCoy was not going to accept this easily, and in his present condition he felt unequal to the task. "The autopsy report states that Ron Kennedy died from a massive power surge delivered almost directly to the heart from a malfunctioning power pack. In addition to the cardiac arrest, Kennedy suffered the loss of his phaser hand when the weapon exploded."

As if he had forgotten. "I know, I did the autopsy."

There was nothing to be gained in explaining the logic of establishing a common knowledge base so Spock ignored the waspish tone and continued. The diagram changed from graphics outlining the human frame to schematics of power packs and phasers.

McCoy watched the pixels arrange and rearrange themselves, hearing his own belligerent voice. Damn it, Len, let the man do his work. "Sorry, go on."

"It is not an easy topic," Spock replied, accepting the apology. "Kennedy's power pack was rigged to deliver the surge in response to a proximity phaser blast. The phaser was standard issue and exploded as a result of excessive power delivered from the power pack to an already fully charged power cell through the victim's body."

Mechanics was right, it sounded so impersonal you could almost believe there was not a life. . . two lives involved. The chair refused to accommodate all his body's angles, McCoy changed position again. "I thought the things melted if they got hit."

"Yes," Spock agreed. "They are designed to fuse, not explode from a phaser strike. This was not struck. The current traveling through Kennedy's body essentially created a single power source of pack and cell. He pointed to the image showing where the leads had been attached. "The surge itself was engineered through the use of a simple Finney and directed to the body through filaments pulled through the casing." The room blurred with every turn of his head, would it be unprofessional to lean against the table? No, a crewman's death should be treated with respect in every way. Drawing a breath, Spock braced himself, a part of him was hoping, illogically, that the CMO would come to the same conclusion before he had to say it. "At this point I will ask you to remember that Kennedy wore the pack across his chest, not at his side. The strap was tight, Fivecoat had difficulty pushing it out of the way to administer CPR. Medical subsequently cut the strap from the body when it couldn't be easily stripped."

"So, he was wearing a time bomb," McCoy said, feeling himself getting ready to reject whatever Spock was getting ready to say. Damn it, the more Spock tried to convince him of anything, the more he always wanted to believe something else. "And they used a power pack because the power packs are easier to rig?"

"Yes, and because of Security. The casings, when returned, are subject to fewer controls and, as you said, they are a simpler mechanism than the phaser. It took less time, few materials and only basic skills to attach the circuit and leads." Spock paused again, but the doctor had no other questions. Begin with sound methodology, his father had taught, if your methods are accepted, so will others accept your conclusions. What made sense in theory seldom proved true in reality, at least in dealing with humans. "The second matter, who sabotaged the equipment, is less straight forward and must be based on elimination of all other explanations. Given the various approaches, I elected to center my investigation on opportunity. This is the preferred approach because the narrow time frame provided only a small window between weapons sign out and beam down. I was able to construct the time frame by use of weaponry records, hydrology tracking and — "

Hydrology tracking, God, when Spock got specific nothing made sense. "Spock, cut to the chase. Who rigged the pack?"

"Kennedy."

For a moment he sat silent, his head swinging side to side in an almost casual denial. "Suicide?" Spock was looking at him with his usual, those are the facts expression. "No way, Spock, no way."

"It is the only explanation which fits the facts."

"Fits the facts?" Bastard. "That there wasn't much time? That isn't much of a fact. No way, I'm not accepting any judgement based on a stop watch, and neither will Jim."

Spock looked at him and blinked, putting a hand on the table to steady himself. He had not kept dinner down, from the swelling in the back of his throat he thought he might be sick again. Outline the methodology, he had been taught, build confidence in your reasoning. "Doctor, I determined that Kennedy's death was a suicide because it could not have been anything else. It is a rational conclusion from a reasoned investigation; this is the time line." He projected a chart on the wall. "The call for the landing party came at 09:12, Kennedy cleared his work station and left Botany at 09:20. Security signed the pack and phaser



out to him at 09:31. At 09:50 he returned to Botany in a clean uniform, wearing the phaser and the pack in that peculiar position. At the time his shipmates assumed it was to make the pack more visible. . . ."

"Good God, man, that's cruel."

"Given Kennedy's penchant for playing for attention, it was a logical assumption on their part. He left Botany approximately 0956 and reported to the transporter room, on time, at 10:00. We know that the equipment was good when it was signed out, we know the sabotage took place before beam down. Logically, it must have taken place between 09:31 and 09:50. Allowing time to change uniforms and walk from Security to his quarters and, from his quarters to Botany there is little more than enough time to have attached the leads and the Finney."

"Anyone could have met him in the hall — how do you know he went to his quarters?"

"His soiled uniform was in his laundry sack, bearing stains from his rotation on lab maintenance."

He could feel the measles red of embarrassment creeping up his neck. "You read the inventory report."

"Affirmative." As if he would have neglected so basic a source of information. "The water system shows two minutes of run in his quarters at 09:38. Microscopic inventory of Kennedy's arsenal assignments show scoring on the power packs where leads had been drawn. Kennedy wore the power pack, tightly, in position for optimum surge to the heart. We know that he returned to his quarters and changed clothing, minus transit time there is insufficient time for anyone else to have tampered with pack. The evidence is that Kennedy left Security, returned to his quarters, showered and changed and sabotaged his equipment."

"Spock, I just don't think so." He had hardly known the boy, but he just could not picture that fresh faced young man flushed with self importance and excitement setting himself up to die the first time someone fired a phaser. McCoy slumped in his seat and folded his arms across his chest. "He wouldn't have done it."

But everything he had just said supported the position that he had. "Doctor, is there some section of my explanation I should repeat?"

"I heard you, it just isn't true."

One should always consider the possibility of error, but he had been over everything multiple times, the center held. "In what way is my logic flawed?"

"In what way is your logic flawed?" That did it. "There's not a damn thing wrong with your logic, but it's all marks on a damn clock. It's just flat out impossible. You're asking me to believe that healthy happy kid just got up the other morning and said, what the hell, I may as well kill myself?"

"I can only explain the method, his motivation is beyond the scope of my investigation." Spock sat, leaning slightly forward, his back ached, so did his head. He had expected this to be exhausting, it was worse than he expected. "But I do know this was not a spontaneous decision. The scoring on the power packs he had used before indicates this was not his first attempt."

"No fucking way. That kid was on top of the world. Your charts and figures don't mean jack shit. You haven't given me one damn reason why a kid with everything going for him would off himself!" He

settled back in the chair, crossed and uncrossed his legs. "Besides," he continued, warming up to his subject, "you just don't kill yourself on a landing party. You kill yourself with pills, or cutting your wrists, or sticking a phaser in your mouth."

Always uncomfortable with explaining human behavior to humans, Spock said nothing while McCoy continued with a list of reasons why Kennedy should not have done what he had done. There was no flaw in the logic, but McCoy was correct, there was no logic in it either. "I agree with you, Doctor, it is a highly irrational act, but I can not report anything else. I can not rearrange the evidence to support another theory simply because we find this one distasteful."

His mouth was already opening to snap off another complaint when he noticed the slump in the Vulcan's shoulders. This was stupid, yelling at the man was not going to get him to change his mind. "This room is too damned hot," McCoy stood and shook himself, feeling a bead of sweat slip down his back between his shoulder blades. In his boots his feet felt sticky between his toes. "I'm not saying your evidence is wrong, I'm just saying I don't buy the conclusion. Do you have to file that report now?"

"I have no reason to. . . ." he almost said no reason to delay, but that was wrong. He could hardly submit a report that the CMO would refuse to support. "The captain is unlikely to demand a report this evening."

"Good. If I come up with something different, you would be willing — never mind, of course you would. Okay, I'll get back to you."



It must have been a million o'clock at night when McCoy stopped trying to find holes in Spock's analysis. He had hacked at the time line with everything he had, hell he'd been the one who had actually TALKED to those people, Spock hadn't. At least he thought Spock hadn't, but he had read the cabin inventory, probably talked to Weston, and Sharp. Just damn it all, that time thing held up. But it just did not make sense. It was like the time when the ship's instruments kept saying Darnell should just get up off the slab and walk away until he stopped being stupid long enough to ask the one question that sense out of nonsense.

It wasn't that long till first shift, and Jim was going to be wanting answers and he if he did not have any better answer, Spock was going to tell him that pile of. . . Spock was going to do his duty as he saw it.

What he needed was a reason. No, what he needed was some coffee, only there was not any coffee to be had, unless he made it. The duty nurse was into health foods and always replaced the pot with some herbal stuff that tasted like damp lawn clippings. He pushed himself away from the desk and stretched, pausing mid way to scratch the back of his neck. Well, he could make coffee, lord knows his could not be any worse than what the rest of the staff made. The stretch felt so good that he decided what he really needed was a little movement to chase the cobwebs. He stood and braced himself against the desk doing the modified McCoy method runners stretch, that felt good too. There weren't many lights on in sickbay, they'd discharged Case sometime that afternoon. The staff was probably taking advantage of the quiet to catch up on some sleep, at least he hoped they were. God knows they had earned it. Oh, jeez, he was going to have to get a cover so he could go to the service.

Well, he wasn't the only one awake. The health conscious nurse looked up as he left his office, a steaming mug in her hand, he waved her back down. Last thing he wanted to hear was another report, or get suckered into drinking some of those wet leaves. He wandered the area for a few minutes pretending he wasn't going where he knew he was going, then stopped in the back of the medical lab, in front of the refrigerator drawers. "Well, Ron, you're the one with the answers, aren't you?" He palmed the controls and the drawer slid out and open. "How 'bout giving a man a break and letting us in on what happened down there?"

The body was cleaned up, blood and dirt washed away. A sheet covered the burns and the long narrow line where the laser scalpel had opened his chest. That incision had been made when they had tried to jolt the heart into response at point blank range. He hadn't had to do any more for the autopsy. "Don't worry, guy, I know you didn't do it."

Ron's hair had long since dried from the shampoo one of the staff had given him. They had washed it and combed it, but none of them had known how he'd worn it. Whoever had done the work had opted for straight back, but the gap on the right hinted that he'd worn it parted, like Jim. A nice looking man, McCoy hadn't noticed that before. He never looked at the faces any longer than he had to, most of what went on after the soul left the skin were intimate invasions. If the dead weren't embarrassed by them, their doctor was. It was just a slab of meat, but that slab had been damned useful to someone. McCoy always made a point of not uncovering any more than was necessary for each step.

"Maybe that makes my work as impersonal as Spock's. Sorry, Ron." He looked down at too still features, trying to imagine them smiling, laughing, talking. Ron had had good skin and one of those rare noses that actually looked like it belonged where it had grown. A good looking man, Sharp was right. Now a good looking corpse. "Everyone says you were a nice guy, Ron." Nice guy, good looking, he shouldn't have had to lie about his women. Why hadn't he really gone for those girls? Was there a real girl friend somewhere?

His personal effects were bagged and set in beside him, down by his feet, per regulations. Ancient cultures used to do that, keep earthly goods close to hand in case the dead needed them. Not much, underwear, boots, uniform pants and tunic. They'd cut the tunic off, but the boots and pants were still good. Not that it mattered, they'll all go through the 'cycler and come out same as new. They were Starfleet property, he thought bitterly, and right now so was Ron Jasper Kennedy. Until they filed that twice cursed report, the man's body was evidence.

He reached for the sack and folded back the flap. It smelled, but not as much as it had, the blood had dried. It was stained with other fluids too, Fivecoat's sweat and the sweat of the medics who'd worked on him. Grass and whatever else he had fallen on. There was a thin slick of medical gel, where they'd put the paddles, for all the good it had done, soft blue on blue cloth. How the hell had they managed that? They'd have had to cut the shirt off first. Well, maybe they'd used it wipe their hands.

McCoy looked down at the bagged clothing and remembered the mess in the Ron's drawer. He'd have to talk to Spock about that; they just had to launder that stuff. It'd be better to send that blood stained shirt than send to that smeared underwear the boy's mother. Something about that bothered him, he had seen something important and forgotten it. "What's wrong with this picture, Bones?"

The drawer slid closed and shut while the doctor stood, not quite shaking. What was wrong was the color, medical gel is clear, the lubricant in Kennedy's cabin was not. The stuff spilled out on Ron's socks was a soft blue, so was the gel on this tunic. "Oh my God." He had done it, he had poked the leads

through his shirt and anchored them in gel. Done just what Spock said he had, the way he'd said it. Done it so well that medical couldn't jolt that fist sized muscle into responding.



"Who's going to tell Jim?"

"I will."

"Good, thanks." Spock hadn't been fifteen seconds answering his knock. He must have been awake, waiting for him. The door whooshed closed behind him, it felt like he was being sealed in. Normally the dry heat in Spock's room didn't bother him, now it sapped all the strength from his arms and legs. He crossed the room and plopped himself down in the center of the sofa, empty space on either side and looked up at his host. Even in slippers he looked tall, he looked like hell. "Call me a coward, but I sure don't want to be the one to break it."

"Do not thank me, I have given you the harder job."

"How's that?"

Spock looked at the doctor, his normally animated face was still. He had seen that expression on his mother's face the day his grandmother died, it had frightened him, reminding him that everyone he knew and cared for was mortal. "Leonard, you are his friend, and when he learns of this, he will need to talk to a friend."

McCoy blinked in astonishment. "You're his friend too."

"Yes, but not in this. He will need you, someone who feels grief as he feels it, who mourns as you mourn. And for a time, he may need to hate me."

If McCoy had felt awkward before, it was nothing to now. The guy was sitting there, daring him not to admit that what was, was. "And you claim not to understand humans."

"I understand myself and my limitations." It had taken hours for McCoy to make his peace with Kennedy's suicide, he should have spent them resting. Instead he had spent them going over every detail, every fact, looking for some reason. It was too late now, Spock went to an empty chair and sat, too exhausted to stand and talk. There was still chah in the pitcher, room temperature the way Vulcans drank. Humans, at least North Americans tended to drink everything in extremes of hot and cold. He poured them both a glass though he doubted McCoy would enjoy it, or that he could keep it down.

"Okay, you've convinced me." He had tasted chah before, he hadn't liked it then, it tasted worse warm. Got any coffee?" Spock shook his head, no. "Well, since you've got all the answers, what am I going to tell him when he asks why? We've got the how all sewn up, we've got nothing on the why."

What could he say? "I knew nothing of the man except his work, which had been adequate, but not outstanding. I understand the mechanics of his actions, but I see no reason for his having taken them." Even the smell of the chah made sweat break out on his upper lip and his stomach heave, he set the cup down. "To Kennedy, it must have been a reasonable course of action, a plan based on some logical construct."

"Yeah, that and a credit will get you a cup of coffee."

"I have no coffee."

He sighed, that wasn't Spock pretending he did not understand terran expressions, that was Spock too tired to put the effort into English. "Useless information, won't buy me anything." Yeah, the man was exhausted, join the club. The ship's surgeon wasn't doing so well either. "I won't be much help to Jim if I can't answer that one simple question."

"Jim knew him better than you or I, perhaps he will — "

"Jim? I don't think so. Jim wouldn't have seen a potential suicide, he saw himself in that poor kid, saw everything positive in himself just waiting to be encouraged into a command line officer. God I wanted you to be wrong."

Spock considered his possible responses, none of them seemed appropriate. Given the power pack, there were only three possible conclusions, sabotage, murder or suicide. A part of him had already concluded that for the good of the ship, suicide was arguably the best of the choices. "Which answer would have been right?"

"Jeez, I don't know and I don't feel philosophical. It's four-thirty, neither of us has had any sleep, and we've got a bitch of a day ahead of us. I'm going to bed — you too."



By rights he should have spent what was left of the night staring at the ceiling worrying about the effect of the news on the crew and most especially on the command. He fell asleep before the minute was out and slept through the alarm. It was almost nine by the time the duty nurse called him, nine thirty by the time he got to the sickbay. Once there he set the wrist some idiot in storage had broken when he tried to make one anti-grav do the work of two, then explained to the unit chief that he was, by god, going to fill out an accident report. That took him right up to the last possible minute he could leave and still get changed to dress blues for the service.

He took forty seconds he did not have to stop by Spock's quarters, but his absentee patient had already given himself permission to attend the memorial. Oh, he was planning on letting Spock go, but the man had looked rotten the night before. McCoy really wanted to get another read on him, if he hadn't started losing his lunch yet, he would soon and puking your guts out with a hole in your back wasn't going to be fun. Well, the service wouldn't last that long, he'd collar him after.

Sure enough, Spock was sitting in the same seat he had the afternoon before, looking solemn, dignified and only slightly less blue than his uniform. Except for his eyes, they were green rimmed and slightly rheumy. "The minute this is over I want you back in bed, better yet, back in a sickbay b — "

"The captain has my report." Spock said, effectively and completely changing the topic.

"Oh, god." He looked across the room to where Jim was chatting with Ed Jenkins and mentally kicked himself for being an idiot. Jim had his in-command face on, and that was worse than vulcan to read. "How did he take it?"

"He accepted my analysis but, like you, he can not fathom why."

"So, what did he say?"

Spock let his composure slip long enough to look uncomfortable. "This is not an appropriate place to — if he talks to you, you may find him disturbed that a crew member could have been — as Kennedy was — without our knowing it."

McCoy looked back at his captain, "Yeah, and he isn't the only one."

"We will need to check the regulations."

Disgusted by his own reaction, McCoy realized he was about to complain about the paperwork he would have to fill out. People were already mostly in their seats McCoy had meant to sit with medical, but that bench was full so he planted himself next to Spock. Sitting next to the FO never seemed to be any enlisted's first choice. As soon as the surgeon provided a buffer, the rest of the pew filled up; the captain moved front and center and the service started.

There might have been a difference in the way the captain conducted the two services, but McCoy could not see it. Jim was his formal Star-Fleet's finest, he'd done his best for Lynn, he couldn't do any better for Kennedy he could only do the same. *Damn few men like Jim Kirk*, Bone could feel his back straighten and his chest puff out a little with pride over his captain and his friend. There was no shortage of mediocrity in the galaxy, but it still amazed him at how could DNA take water and some chemicals and make a few extraordinary individuals.

Ed Jenkins seemed to be having similar thoughts, or maybe it was just the realization of what he was about to do. The poor guy was standing there with a look of stunned awe. Well, for an enlisted the thought of standing up and giving a speech to a room packed with senior officers ought to be enough to put the fear of fleet in a man. He was pale and a fine beading of sweat was growing on his upper lip and forehead. Jeez, I hope the guy doesn't pass out.

When the captain finished he nodded to Ed and stepped back, still wearing his captainly concern face. As well he might, he could not very well wink at the guy the way he normally did when a little silent encouragement was in order. Ed came forward and stood in that peculiar nervous speaker pose, as if he had just recently acquired hands and wasn't sure what to do with them. McCoy set himself for a wretched half hour but after a false start and a sip of water Ed got going and managed all right.

It was not the most elegant eulogy, but it would pass muster for almost everyone there. Everyone but Enterprise's senior command, who knew a few more details than the rest. Ed talked about how wonderful it was to see all of Ron's friends there, and his special friends. McCoy had a bad moment with that one, he had forgotten to suggest that Ed leave Ron's "girl friends" out of it. God it was painful, sitting there listening to the roommate telling stories that were just so much fantasy — but Ed believed them and admired Ron for them. Had Ron believed them?

At last Ed got on to things that McCoy knew were true. How he had loved living in space and serving the Fleet, how he had loved landing party duty and exploration. And books, high adventure in fact and most especially fiction. How the hero's of Masada, Chernoble, Kwang Su and T'xient had inspired him. Finally, he closed with an ancient poem from one of Kennedy's books, Housman's *To an Athlete Dying Young*. The whistle blew and that was that. After the usual awkward pause, when no one wants to

be the first to leave, people starting getting up and milling towards the door. McCoy turned to find that Spock had already pulled his disappearing act.

Well, he couldn't blame the man. In the first place he'd looked lousy, and secondly, everyone knew that Vulcan's just don't get along with intense emotion. Not that there had been any here, but it would have been cruel to say so. The Botany crew was there in its entirety, including hydroponics, but at least six of them keep glancing at the clock. Ed had scheduled things a little too close to practice for comfort and, as he overheard one of them say, Security had held the volleyball title quite long enough.

Kirk had also managed to slip away, which must have taken some doing. The senior staff tended to grab the captain's ear any time they had a chance and there were a sufficient number of brownnosers in the lower ranks who would want to make damn sure James Kirk knew they had been there, doing their duty. McCoy wandered over to stand with medical a few minutes and let them fill up the space with chatter while he decided where to go. He really wanted to stop by and check on his AWOL patient but when Jim was ready to talk, he would come to sickbay.



Back at sickbay, McCoy started in on reports and reading, killing time until Jim was ready to talk. The "read sometime" pile that had taken the better part of his drawer was down to a reasonable stack when Kirk showed up, hours later than McCoy's personal schedule had said he would. "So, where have you been?" was out of his mouth before he noticed the "captain the grim" expression.

"Talking to Sharp, among others."

Oh, boy. Jim wasn't depressed and looking for a friend, he was pissed and looking for a fight.

The captain hurled himself into a chair and looked around for something to break, grabbing a coffee mug off the desk and started rubbing his thumb up and down the handle, hard. "I wanted to know how the hell someone in his department could have been suicidal without him knowing it."

"And he said?"

"That he didn't have the slightest idea." He shifted positions, crossed, then uncrossed his legs, trying to get comfortable, knowing he couldn't. "And I'm asking you the same question."

Damn good question. James T. hated shrugs for answers, McCoy almost managed not to, "My answer isn't much different."

"What the hell does Starfleet pay you for?"

"Keeping the crew healthy and alive, if possible." And if that did not sound like a prerecorded message. Little beads of sweat started to form between his shoulder blades, it took a lot to keep level headed when Kirk's charisma turned carnivorous. Grown men, McCoy reminded himself, do not babble. "I'll admit, I tend to approach the job assuming that the crew wants to be healthy and alive."

The mug thudded on the desk top. "In other words, my officers don't see anything they don't expect to see. From the laundry crew I'd accept that. I do expect just a little more responsibility from my senior officers, Doctor. That man killed himself and took another with him — "

"I know, I did the autopsies." The image of Lee's body came to mind, the way the head didn't roll, stable on the seared off plane that should have been the back of her skull. Kennedy, looking almost like an actor playing at being at corpse.

Kirk swiveled in his seat and stared at the far wall. The sound of his teeth grating could probably be heard in the main ward. "The point is, how the hell can we keep it from happening again if we don't know what caused it in the first place?"

"Doctors deal with symptoms, Captain. Look, Jim, I've been talking to his shipmates, been through his records. He passed all his physical and psychological exams, dead center, every time. There wasn't any depression, weight loss, weight gain, no change in habits, no fascination with death, no playing high risk games. . ."

"Except rigging his power pack, Doctor. I don't know about you, but to me, that qualifies as a high risk game."

He had him there. The captain's eyes were still fixed on the far wall, the big vein in his neck twitched under the skin, McCoy was pretty sure that he could take his pulse visually. "Agreed. And you tell me what, short of a strip search of every landing party member before and after every beam down would have found that."

Kirk turned and slapped his hand flat on the desk so hard McCoy jumped. "I shouldn't have to know everything, that's why Starfleet assigned me a ship full of officers and scientists." He grabbed the mug back and started whacking it against his palm. "I suppose Spock is going to tell me the same thing."

Doughnuts would get you dollars Spock had already told him that. Hell, the man always went to Spock first. "Spock is going to?" he finally snapped, "I'll bet he already has. You're just bringing in good old McCoy for a second opinion. What are you doing, going from man to man until you get the answer you want? If we're all telling you the same thing, maybe, just maybe it's because it's the truth. Jim, the reason we didn't see anything because there wasn't anything there to see."

"Yesterday I would have said that was reasonable." His expression edged a degree or two north on the anger scale. "Sharp offered his resignation."

McCoy watched as Kirk turned to stare at some point overhead. "Did you take it?"

"Hell no."

"You want mine?" He tried to make it sound matter-of-fact.

"Hell no." Kirk stopped studying the ceiling with manic concentration. "At least Sharp had the decency to look upset."

"So did I, when I found out." Upset — he had nearly taken Spock's head off. He got up and filled his cup, and Jim's with whatever was in the pot. It looked dark enough to be coffee, didn't much smell like it.

Kirk sniffed at his mug, scowled and set the cup down. "Bones, one of my crew got up, strapped himself into a suicide suit and went whistling off on a landing party hoping to god he wouldn't come back.

No one saw it coming and no one has the slightest idea why." He relaxed into the seat cushions, shaking his head. "That isn't the sort of thing that inspires confidence in command."

It might not have smelled like sickbay coffee, but it tasted like it, he reached for the lightener. "Okay." He got up and crossed the counter where he had a desk basket filled with print outs and tapes. "Here's every physical, aptitude assessment, job evaluation and personality inventory he's had since he was a cadet. Spock's read it, and I've read it. Ron Jasper Kennedy reads like a damned all American boy novel from start to finish. He thought a little more of himself than maybe he should have and he exaggerated his prowess with women which makes him 100 percent human. Now, you read this stuff and tell me where I'm wrong. You talk to anyone on this ship and if you find out any sign we should have seen and missed and I'll not only offer my resignation, I'll insist you take it."

"I just might have to do — "

"Excuse me, Doctor, Sir." It was the duty nurse. "Mr. Spock just came in asking to be readmitted. I thought you'd want to know right away."

"Damn, I thought he looked half rotted." Bones pushed himself away from the desk and stood. "Jim, I'm sorry, you'll have to chew me out later." The captain got up to follow him out. He held up a hand to stall him. "Jim, if Spock's checking himself into sickbay he's already had to swallow his pride, let him keep his privacy. Let me check him over without an audience; you can wait, or I'll call you as soon as I've got him settled." For a wonder, Jim obeyed.

As it turned out, it did not take very long to get the first officer settled. There was nothing wrong with him that had not been wrong before, just the messy side of a body repairing itself. Within an hour he went from looking miserable to looking miserable and annoyed. McCoy attributed every bit of the improvement to just getting the man off his feet like he'd been telling him to do for the last two days. Not that he expected Spock to admit that he had been right, of course. He'd long since abandoned any hope of the Vulcan ever owning up that he knew more about Vulcan medicine than the FO did. In fact, it was pretty much that topic they were debating now.

"I did not," Spock repeated, "ask to be readmitted. I merely thought it prudent to report the symptoms."

He made it sound as though the symptoms belonged to someone else who had been careless enough to leave them lying around and getting underfoot. It would have been a more convincing argument if it hadn't been interrupted by a sudden departure for the head. McCoy waited patiently until he came back and climbed back on the bed with an air of determined indifference. "Why do you set yourself up for it, Spock? You ought to know by now that most humans live for the sole purpose of saying 'I told you so'."

"A physician ought to be above such petty motivations."

"Readings aren't too bad, considering," McCoy commented, changing the subject. He had made his point. "More than anything else, you just need to get some of the bedrest you didn't get before. No, actually that's a lie, at this stage I'd have had to haul you back here anyway."

"If, as you said, this is a normal part of the recovery, and must simply be endured," again the detached reference, "then there is nothing that requires I remain in sickbay."

"Wrong-o, Spock. The Chief Medical Officer of the Enterprise requires it." He bit back what he really wanted to say — Who the hell do you think you are that my staff should have to dance attendance on you? Spock lay back and continued to look miserable and annoyed, but at least he was quiet. "Besides, give me a break, as long as you're here, Jim isn't going to kill me."

"It is good to know that my being here serves some purpose." For a moment, he looked almost happy. "Then he has spoken to you."

And there was a world of worry in those six words. "Well, that's one way of putting it." He fussed with a tray of instruments, neatly arranged and rightly polished they always reminded him of a box of Christmas tree ornaments. Too pretty to be functional. "He's ready to feed Sharp and me to the anti-matter drives, you too — but not until you're well enough."

"Yes, that would be his reaction."

"Say again?"

Spock looked up at him, "If he is furious — "

"He is, take my word for it."

"If he is furious, it is as much at himself as at us. He knew Kennedy better than we, and he too suspected nothing."

McCoy stopped trying to rub a water spot off the tray. Sigmund Spock strikes again. He should have figured that out. Well, maybe it was better that it hadn't occurred to him before. Jim would not have appreciated having that thrown in his face. "Being proven as human as the rest of us has never been known to improve his mood."

"I have never been proven human," Spock retorted. "Your pardon, that was unworthy."

And untrue, McCoy added mentally. "Yeah, well, we're both tired. But I'm the only one who's got an excuse. Get some sleep. I promised Jim I'd call him and let him know how you're doing. God knows why, but he's worried about you."



Starfleet might not have a file for everything, but it was generally believed they could come up with stats on right versus left side sleepers, and give you breakdowns by enlisted, officers and length of service. In all those files, James Kirk couldn't find one scrap of information that said Ron Kennedy might take a phaser and short circuit his heart. This research was not getting him one damn step closer to an answer. The ceiling still didn't have any answers painted on it, neither did the floor. All he had was a headache, a department heads meeting in ten minutes that he'd already postponed twice and an urge to break something — something that would make a lot of noise.

God, he'd known it was trouble when Spock said he was ready to give his report and did not bother to call Security. "Suicide." That was how he had started the meeting. "Suicide," he'd said, then laid out a trail of evidence and a time line as airtight as the ship's hull. When he was done, he'd asked to sit down while he answered questions. Answered? No, he didn't do much about the answers. Jesus, why?

Everything he had read so far said that Ron Kennedy was the kind of guy parents hoped their daughters would bring home. Good student, clean record in the academy, clean service record, reasonable to good evaluations by his superiors — was that all he had gotten on the CPA? Well, he'd been fresh out of school, it takes time to develop command skills, but no wonder he'd transferred to botany. What a record, didn't the guy ever get into trouble? His own time at the academy was a little less polished. He'd managed to get his ass in trouble waiting in line to get his room assignment, his upper told him if he started marching detail at 75 rounds every night from that minute on he just might keep even with the demerits. Not Kennedy, he must have had the cleanest nose in the academy and the fleet.

"Everything in this record says you were getting along fine, what was going on that made you want to die?" What makes anyone want to die? Aside from rational suicide, choosing controlled death over some prolonged hideous disease, Kirk could only think of only four reasons — mental illness, unbearable loss, humiliation or pressure. Kennedy wasn't crazy and he wasn't sick. Humiliation? No. And there was not any message that said he had lost his best friend or favorite uncle or something. He should have been on top of the world — everything was going right.



James Kirk was not on the bridge, in his office or in his quarters for McCoy to report to, and he did not think the man would appreciate a ship-wide. Probably on the observation deck, as that was his usual escape. McCoy lifted his hand to call, then thought the better of it; the observation deck was a public area. Thirty minutes ago the captain had respected Spock's dignity and let him puke in private, the least McCoy could do was return the favor. No calls, nothing to draw attention, he would find him on foot. He started to go, got part way down the hall, when the results of a soccer game gone sour tumbled out the lift and started limping their way towards the bay. It was another four hours before he could get out — one and a half to get the foursome fixed up, two and a half for the paper work.

Kirk still wasn't in his quarters or on the bridge when McCoy left his office. He was sitting with Spock. As usual, Kirk was doing most of the talking, Spock looked interested but tired. Another one of those dilemmas life seemed to be tossing his way lately, whatever the captain was talking about, it was probably doing him a world of good. The recipient of the chatter, however, ought to be left alone to curl up, put a paw over his nose and go to sleep.

"Is this a private party, or can anyone drop in?"

Spock summed it up, "cross cultural role of cathartics in rituals such as the Navajo Enemyway, Andorian Atonement and the Vulcan cleansing chant."

McCoy looked at him and shook his head, the things Kirk could find to talk about when he did not want to talk about the things he needed to talk about. "Jim, you're a marvel, a cheery little tete-a-tete with a friend, just the ticket for a convalescent."

"Actually, there was an excellent review in Federation Communication discussing —"

Count on Spock to stick up for Jim. "Can't wait to read it, send me a copy. Jim, let's walk, you can finish yelling at me."

"Spock says he's okay," the captain said as soon as they left the ward. "Is he telling the truth?"

"Yup, it's just his body cleaning up a lot of waste."

Kirk looked doubtful. "Spock doesn't usually volunteer to spend time in sickbay."

"And he claims he hasn't this time, either." The doctor headed for the lift and picked a destination before Kirk had a chance. "Give him credit for being sensible — if it was just the upset stomach and headache he'd tough it out but that fever's got him dizzy. It'll be over in another day or so. I'll probably keep him there just to piss him off."

That got a chuckle. "I always thought that's why you did it."

"And now you know for sure." The lift doors opened and they stepped out onto the rec deck. The captain would have headed for the observation ports, but McCoy had other ideas. Given a free head, the man would get lost in the stars, so the ship's doctor was going to bring him down to earth. The gardens would be just the place. A little more than half the roses were in bloom — those big yellow ones the size of a dinner plate were making the whole place smell like summer. It made McCoy think of graduation parties, ice cream socials and fields green with fireflies.

They walked along in silence for awhile. Most of the off-duty personnel had been at the game and now were off celebrating. The few crew who were in the gardens were paying more attention to each other than to the flowers. "So, who won the volleyball game?"

"TreeHuggers — three straight, 15-10, 17-15 and 15-12." The path crunched nicely underfoot, Jim slowed down long enough to pick up a stick. "You're going to tell me they didn't miss Ron much."

"No," he said, honestly, "I just didn't know the score. The flotsam of some soccer game got my attention early on, but that's as good a place to start as any."

Kirk started peeling the bark off the stick. "Okay, Ron wasn't much of a volleyball player." A boot toe scuffed the path. "And yes, they'll be a stronger team without him," he added sourly.

"No shame in that. They wouldn't want me on their team either."

"He didn't kill himself because he couldn't play volleyball."

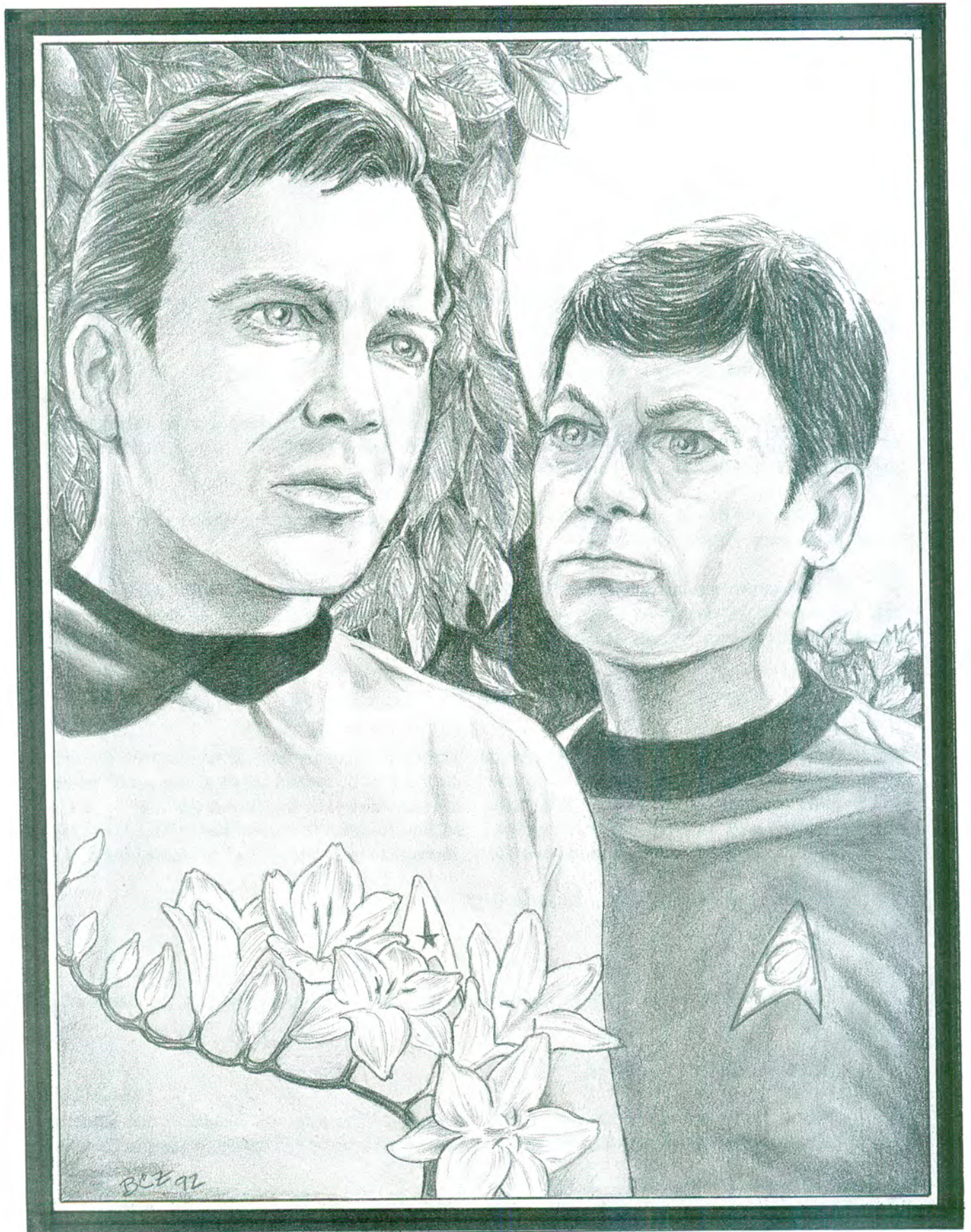
"Not very likely." McCoy agreed. Where was this leading?

"Bones, I think I was the reason."

"Jesus, Jim." Of all the things McCoy had expected to hear, that was pretty low on the list. "That's crazy."

"I've been thinking about it, god it's hard to think about anything else, and I keep coming back to the same question. Why the hell would that kid want to die? What was going in his life that he had to get away from that badly? The only answer I can come up with is me and all the damned pressure I was putting on him."

He looked at his captain and friend, the man wasn't maudlin, he was serious. "No, Jim, you didn't."



"The hell I didn't." He stopped dead, turning to face McCoy. "Worse, I've been pushing you, Spock and Sharp, pushing you the same way for something to prove me wrong. God I hate this job," he started off down the path again, almost at a jog.

McCoy caught up with him, wondering what in blazes he was supposed to do now. "Jim. You just can't drop something like that in my lap and walk off!" Kirk slowed up to a fast walk. "Jim, now that's stupid and you know it."

"Do I?"

"Yeah, you do. Spock says he'd been playing games with his power pack for at least three months."

"Right, about as long as I'd been working with him."

"Aw, Jim." Why the hell didn't these uniforms have pockets? He rubbed at his thigh, trying to come up with at least two words that made sense. "The kid wanted a chance, you thought he deserved one and gave it to him. That isn't pressure, that's leadership."

"And I lead him right to the grave." They passed a stand of birches — the captain's face was as pale as the trees. "Then I pushed him in."

"You know he named me in his will, Doctor? Left me his library. He wanted me to have it, said I deserved it for everything I'd done for him." The stick broke in his hands, he dropped the two pieces as he strode back the way he came.



When prime shift started McCoy had already been in his office for an hour savoring his morning coffee and his misery. The monitors told him that the only person he wanted to talk to was sound asleep and he could not bring himself to wake him. Some friend and advisor he had turned out to be — let his captain turn and walk away thinking he'd pushed a man into suicide. Sometime during his second cup he realized it tasted good, someone must have finally found the clasp to the filter, or cleaned the pot.

What the hell was he going to do about Jim?

"Doctor?"

Yeah, there was the rest of the ship to think about. Life didn't stop for one man, no matter who that man was. "Yes Chapel?"

"Smith is here for his physical."

"Right, I'll be there in a minute." Smith, wonderful. The man was convinced that a man's health was revealed through his bowel movements. It wasn't that it was a bad theory, it was that the man

had a rare gift for description. Leonard tried hard not to schedule him right before or after any meal. "What am I in for?"

"Foot long floater."

"Great."

By the time the physical was over and McCoy knew more details than he cared to about Smith's medical theories and their manifestations, Spock was awake and suggesting that he was much better. So much better that it was illogical to keep him in sickbay.

"We'll talk about that later." The readings did not look all that different than they had the day before. A good night's sleep had a way of convincing most people that they were made of iron, well copper in Spock's case, and ready to move mountains. "By the way, you were right."

"I often am," Spock said smoothly. "To what instance are you referring?"

"About giving me the harder job."

"Indeed." Spock stayed quiet a moment, wondering if that were a complaint or an observation. Either way it was obvious that the doctor wanted to talk and wanted to be invited to do so. "He spoke to you then."

"God yes." McCoy scanned the chart, pausing at the diet notes. "We sure gave you a big breakfast, did you eat any of it?" He got an affirmative. "Did you keep any of it down?" Spock made one of those noncommittal noises. "You keep two meals down in a row and I'll let you out." That ought to get some cooperation.

McCoy had a habit of giving you one piece of information, then making you work for the rest of it. After waiting what seemed long enough Spock conceded the round to McCoy and asked. "And it didn't go well?"

"No." He plopped down in a chair. "Spock, Jim is blaming himself — not the usual the captain is responsible line, he honestly thinks he pushed the kid too hard, expected too much, and that Kennedy saw dying as the only graceful way out."

"Unlikely. That Weapon's Inventory shows scoring on power packs coinciding with the captain's attention means nothing, it is simply as far back as WI's records tracks power packs."

His eyes opened in a sort of horrified dawning, "God, you don't think he was playing some weird sort of suicide roulette, I mean he was, but was he just doing it for a kick?"

Spock shook his head. "I also considered that possibility; however, it seems improbable. Kennedy's reputation was such that if he had played such a dangerous irresponsible game, he would have bragged. Still, it could be, I have never claimed to be anything but inept when ascertaining or explaining human motivation."

"Don't give me that bull, Spock. Your mother is human, she just married a Vulcan."

"A case in point, I have never understood why."

McCoy looked at him askance, trying to decide if it were a joke, then. "Spock, he really does blame himself."

"A normal response for him."

"Damn it, Spock he needs some answers and I don't have any to give him. Besides you know how he is, he thinks the perfect captain, ship's surgeon or first officer ought to have seen it coming and done something."

"Perhaps the perfect captain, first or CMO would have, but we did not. Leonard, it is useless to berate ourselves. Neither you nor I believe we overlooked any obvious or subtle clue that Kennedy was suicidal."

"No. Everyone knows that kid was on cloud nine with all the attention, everyone says he went around glowing and being generally insufferably proud. If he was under stress he had a damned odd way of showing it."

Spock adjusted the covers, pulling them closer against the ship's chill. "Then there must be some other explanation that fits the facts. Doctor, we have as gathered as much information as we are likely to have, the explanation must be within that body of information."

"But where?" McCoy grumbled. Spock closed his eyes and considered the question, it was a good question. The answer to it was the answer to the larger question. Assuming either could be found. "Jim went down to Security and got the books, that whole shelf of books. Some of 'em probably worth a pretty penny."

"Indeed, I read the inventory."

Leonard chewed on his lip and discontent for a moment. "Well, he's not keeping them, already started on arrangements to donate them to Bancroft's rare book room. Said something about a special book plate, Ron's name and a clipper ship or something."

"Yes, that would be appropriate." Spock thought about his quarters, his own bed and the thick thermal. Two meals away. It could be done. Then chided himself for such selfish considerations. There was still the issue of Kennedy's suicide to be resolved, and his captain's belief that he had been the inadvertent cause. Somewhere in that body of information — "A predictable collection for a young officer, heroics and high adventure — Tale of Two Cities, The Capping of Chernoble, Green Warriors."

"Yeah, Masada, T-x-chancg. All over the place in dates and places. One looked kind of prophetic for a navy man — The Sailor Who Fell, ah something."

"Fell From Grace with the Sea. Yukio Mishima, interesting author. I looked him up, he also authored at least one of the descriptions Kennedy used in his will — starvation and noble thoughts."

"You what? I told you no close work!"

"Doctor, the captain has not released us from our assignment. I thought there might be some clue in his belongings. Mishima killed himself too, but for unusual reasons, he was celebrating his bodies' perfection through self sacrifice for a noble cause."

"What, you mean he killed himself because he was perfect?"

"Another culture, Doctor. Not all times and ages have used suicide exclusively to avoid continued life. For some, death was a desirable goal. Mishima wrote that a heroic or noble death could not be reconciled with flaccid muscles and slack skin."

"Yeah, I'll just get myself into shape so I can kill myself." He started to make another snide comment, then stopped. Oh lord, did that make any kind of sense? "Spock, you got time to hear a crazy theory?"



Well, the captain was right where Spock said he would be, doing exactly what he said he would. It wasn't a hopeful picture, it was melancholic. A lone man standing before a massive window, dwarfed by the ship, the ship dwarfed by space. And most of the stars so far away that no one would ever feel their heat. Maybe that was why he always felt cold on the observation deck, all that vacuum sucking the heat out. McCoy blew out a breath, the way he would before starting any awesome task, and walked over. For a full minute, his friend did not change position, speak or do anything to acknowledge his presence. Okay, McCoy thought, you win, I'll start. But he didn't have to, even as he was opening his mouth, Kirk spoke up.

"See that? For once, we're facing Sol."

Talking about home, good sign or bad? Bad probably. "Where?"

"Oh, we're too far away to see it. But it's that way." Kirk pointed out and down. "Of course, it's hard to get a fix on it."

McCoy squinted, "they all look alike."

"Bones, that's because you have no poetry in your soul."

"That's what my ex told me, too." He looked sideways, to see if that got him a grin. It did, but like Sol, from this distance it was almost too small to see. "I look out there and all I see are stars, Jim. You look out there — Jim, what exactly do you see?"

"Answers sometimes, sometimes questions."

Pretty cryptic response, but instead of the words, McCoy listened to the sounds. It wasn't a brush off, it was an honest answer. Honest at least as far as it went. "Let me guess. Tonight you're not seeing either one."

"Good guess." Kirk looked a little longer, still not seeing what he had come to see, then turned around and walked over to a bench. He stared at that as if he were figuring out what it was for, then sat. "Tonight they're just stars. But there's sure a lot of 'em. How's Spock?"

Now that was a diversion. "Better. Discharged him an hour ago." Kirk looked at him, suspicious. "Well, yeah, I made a deal with him this morning, told him if he kept two meals down I'd let him out. I neglected to say anything about the size of the meals. Bastard ate two crackers for lunch, three for dinner but by gawd, he kept 'em down."

Jim almost laughed, succeeded in a chuckle. Spock and McCoy, the two of them were like binary stars, a stable orbit maintained by a mutual effort to pull each other apart. "Bones, you set yourself up for it every time. Why do you do it?"

"You mean, aside from the entertainment value it has for you?" He shrugged, "I took an oath that says I'm supposed to do more good than harm, and I keep trying." And if that didn't put the kibosh on the conversation. "Same question, Jim."

A sigh, a scowl, then he pulled up one leg to tuck under his other, like a cadet sprawled on a bunk. "Same thing I guess, trying to do more good than harm. Leonard, I thought I was helping that boy, swear to god, I thought I was helping him."

"You were." He didn't have long to wait for the denial. "Yeah, for whatever it's worth, you were helping him reach his personal goals."

"Come on, Len, who has suicide as a goal?"

"Yukio Mishima."

"That a person, place, or thing?"

"Person, nineteenth century, spent years toning his body until it was perfect enough to deserve the honor of suicide."

He unfolded his legs and planted his feet on the deck, preparing to stand. "Bones, if there's some reason why you're working a deranged person who's been dead over 300 years into this conversation, I'd really appreciate your getting to it."

"Glad to." Hurry it up, Bones, you're losing your audience. "Jim, last night you asked me a question and I didn't have an answer for you. I think I do, now." Kirk settled back down. "You kept asking yourself what was going on that made would make that boy want to die. And, believe it or not, so did we. I mean, what kind of sense did it make? You said it yourself, he was up for the CPA, starting up with a new girl, basking in the glory of the captain," he flinched at that, but too bad, it was part of the equation. "You even said it, this was one of the best weeks of his life."

"I don't think he killed himself because he didn't want to live, I think he killed himself because he wanted to die."

The captain couldn't have looked blanker if he had been lobotomized. "Gotta tell you the truth, Bones, those sound a lot alike to me."

"But they aren't!" His hands started sketching designs in the air as he warmed up to his topic. "We've all been assuming that he had to be getting away from something, something really rotten that made him not want to live. I think that boy wanted to die because his life was about perfect and wasn't going to get any better." He let the idea float. It had sounded pretty strange to him, too, when he had thought of it. "Mishima wrote some of those books Ron left you, Jim. The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea. And that picture of St. Sebastian that hung over Kennedy's bed was out of another Mishima book. I'll admit, I was looking for something else. Maybe like he'd already taken the CPA and failed, maybe impotent, maybe not doing well in Botany."

"Well, he was a rotten volleyball player."

Time to drop the other shoe. "He didn't know it." He leaned forward, looking Jim straight in the face. "Jim, did you listen to Ed's eulogy? Ron as volleyball pro, Ron as everyone's friend, Ron as a master botanist. Ed believed it all and for a damn good reason — Ron believed it. That boy was full of romance, romance and fantasy and the kind of passion that pulls men to space, pulls some of them to greatness. Now I think that boy wanted a tragic hero's death, and he did literally everything he could to ensure it."

"Bones, suicide might be tragic, but it isn't heroic."

He nodded, this is where it got dicey. A lot of speculation, nothing he could prove. "Well, we weren't supposed to figure that part out."

"Whose theory is this, yours, Spock's or both?"

It was the reception he expected. Best defense is a good offense. "Which part, and does that make a difference?"

"No."

"Good". Jeez, he hated it when everything had to be sanctified by Spock. Still, Jim had a point, he wasn't much with equipment, except how to turn it on and use it. When it broke he called maintenance. "Spock thinks he tested the Finneys and the proximity blast before — those first trips. Security says they don't bother keeping track of whether a phaser's been fired or not cause so many people can't resist squeezing off a shot or two, you know, taking out a killer bush or something. Well now, Ron could test the leads and the charge, but he didn't take into account how good a conductor the human body is. And why would he? He wasn't a medic, wasn't even really a scientist. You said yourself he took just enough classes to qualify for botanist mate. Focused you called him, and he was. If it didn't get him any closer to his dream, he didn't do it. He thought the leads would be destroyed, we'd put it down to an equipment malfunction. He might have gotten away with it, I don't think even Spock would have gone into it so deep if that phaser hadn't exploded."

And now it was time to give the man some room to think. Probably the hardest part, keeping your mouth shut until it's time to say something — and you've got something to say. But he had experience going for him, when he did not let his own pigheaded pride get in the way he could read Jim better than any man alive. He could almost see the process, layering thoughts, checking to see where they touched, where they didn't, where they fused. Commanders learn to make decisions quickly, and while he watched the muscles relaxed, the breathing evened out, the blood pushed through arteries at a normal rate. Like his body understood before the rest of him. Time. "Jim, life was a shiny red balloon made up of fantasy perfection, Ron decided to let go of the string and let it sail away rather than see it pucker up and fall to earth."

"When two pieces of equipment fail, and fail in atypical ways, it requires a faith in coincidence I do not possess." Kirk quoted, he had a look of comprehension on his face. "Bones, some of those other books, Tale of Two Cities, Front Runner, Masada, Heros of Chernoble — they're all full of heroes dying at the zenith." He shook his head, not in denial, more like trying to settle out the final lumps and bumps. "Christ, Bones, how do you test for that? Anyone who goes into Starfleet has to know that it's high risk, they've got to be willing to lay down their life. How do you tell the difference between willingness and eagerness?"

He looked into his bag of tricks and decided he was fresh out of miracles for the night, he was also completely, suddenly, exhausted. "Jim, I'll be honest, I don't know, hell, I don't even know that I'm right. Okay, I know I'm right, not that I can prove it. But that's what I'm going to write in my report." Jim looked off to the side, his face changing expressions too fast to count, like a boiling pot of oatmeal. "You got a problem with that?"

"No, I just feel a little guilty."

"Good, when I got here you were feeling a lot guilty." He stood up and stretched, he was hungry, tired and wanted to go off duty. "Lord we're going to have to write a major load of reports to Command on this one. You want to talk about it over pizza and beer?"

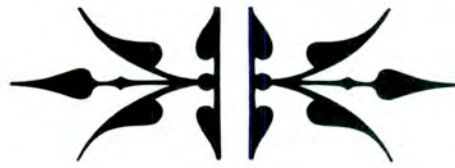
Kirk looked up at him and grinned. "Yeah, I'll meet you in the mess in a half hour."

"What's wrong with now?" Oh, he wanted to sit and look out at the stars awhile longer. Well, it was probably safe enough now, but he was tired and hungry; those stars would be there later. His stomach growled, he was tired and just plain did not feel like being understanding anymore. "Was Iowa so rotten you get some kind of kick in seeing how far away from home you are?"

Kirk grinned at him, shaking his head. "Bones, you are such a grouch when you're hungry, besides you know damn well this is home," he spread out his hands to encompass the ship, "and that," he gestured to the view port, "that is my living room window." And he leaned back, looking for all the world like a man dressed in the comfort of a warm robe and slippers, sitting back in his easy chair and surveying his domain.

Come to think of it, he was.





CONVERT

By CarolMel Ambassador

"How can you state that Federation technology, which is recognized to have reached one of the most sophisticated levels in the known galaxy, as not dependable in battle, cadet Heim?" Professor Casways bellowed.

Cadet Jayson Heim stood firmly before his teacher. Hands were locked calmly behind him as his instructor looked at him with clear outrage. The youth seemed oblivious to the Professor's mood.

He shook his young head. "No sir, I have not found technology to be always dependable. On the Enterprise when the torpedo shoot would not clear automatically, we often had to do it manually. Mr. Scott had to show us. We only had 4 seconds after each . . . "

Professor Casways erupted with fury. "That damned ship again? You have been back here two months now, cadet Heim and still, you speak of your adventure while aboard the Enterprise constantly. Are you going to balance the rest of your future decisions upon the experiences with that idiotic Admiral Kirk and his famed starship?"

There were murmurs in the classroom as fellow students began whispering, lightly enough in the hope not to elicit Casways' wrath. Their professor was a brilliant teacher and highly respected at the Academy, but it was obvious he had quickly tired of students' frequent references to the Enterprise's battle with the starship Alliance. Once those cadets who had survived the confrontation against Khan had returned to finish their schooling, the Enterprise and Admiral Kirk had become the school's main topic of conversation.

The survival of the battle against Kahn had instantaneously transformed children into adults. The students had returned back to the Academy and gripped their scholastic studies with an obsession. Within the last two months, nearly every top ranking student of each class also happened to be the same students who had undergone the adventures of training aboard the U.S.S. Enterprise at the time it had gone to Regula One. And now the students were beginning to be treated with awe by the other, much less experienced students who had not been able to go with Kirk.

In some of the conversations overhead by the staff of the Academy, there were murmurs of wishes to crew the next ship that would be captained by James T. Kirk.

Sudden silence engulfed the room, as a classroom of stunned faces stared back at their instructor. Professor's Casways face was reddening with fury and it was the calmness of his response that only accentuated the approaching hurricane.

"What did you say?"

"Sir, I think it is unjustified to call Admiral Kirk an idiot. If it were not for his brilliance in combat . . ."

"Brilliance! He was an imbecile, cadet Heim. He should have realized that he should not go into battle with a ship load of children for one thing, and for another . . ."

"Sir."

The firm tone of Heim brought the professor up short. He was not quite used to such a bold attitude from one so young. He was used to his students often cowering to his authority. Heim's response startled him into waiting for the other's reaction.

"As I recall sir, there was not much choice to avoid the battle sir. The Alliance attacked us first. Captain Kirk saved our lives. He drew the enemies attention to him, while we prepared ourselves for battle and sir — he believed in us. He showed a trust in us, which I have not yet seen illustrated at this school sir."

"Perhaps you would prefer to gain your education somewhere else, cadet?" Casways' anger was so pronounced that his knuckles had turned white in their grip.

"Perhaps, if it would come to that, sir," Heim returned. "Would you expel me from this institution on the issue that I am merely trying to defend a hero's honor?"

"Hero it is?"

"Yes sir," Heim hesitated only for a moment. A brief glance around the classroom indicated that all the other students' attention was rivetted to him, awed for both his courage in standing up to the professor as well as to dare to defend his opinion. Several students stared at him with open admiration.

Heim returned his attention back to the fuming man. "You've been teaching us a lot about battles, technology and leaders, sir. In your class, last quarter, I was amazed by the strategies of the great tacticians throughout time. I learned from you what characteristics comprised the most successful pioneers and explorers of the galaxy. But there were several points that were overlooked sir." For a moment Heim hesitated, then pressed on.

"For a leader to accomplish his goals, he needs a ship. And for the manning of that ship the captain needs a crew, a crew that will trust in his judgment and will believe that he will do everything in his power to protect and preserve them."

Heim cleared his throat, his own inner intensity almost overwhelming him. "Sir, I must

truthfully state that I think that Admiral James T. Kirk should be listed in the history books as a hero. I'm just grateful that all heroes are not just those men and women in the past. I've had the opportunity to actually experience one at his best."

The student's outburst had tempered Casways' anger to some degree as the professor suddenly realized that last quarter, before Heim's trip to the Enterprise, the cadet had been a quiet student who had been having some difficulty in school. Now he was the top student in the class. To have transformed one man — yes Casways would call him that now — To have transformed him so drastically from boy to man within so short of a time was certainly a trait to be acknowledged."

"Have you ever personally met Admiral Kirk, cadet?"

Heim shook his head, disappointment evident on his face. "Most of the others did, sir. I had to leave the ship early on an assignment for Mr. Scott." Then suspecting that his teacher would question how he could respect someone whom he had never met, the cadet added: "Sir, wouldn't a leader be able to be judged by the faith of his crew in his leadership? We were terrified sir, scared witless. Admiral Kirk would talk to us sir, to assure us that he believed in us and that we would survive."

Casways nodded, somewhat subdued now, in his anger. The man before him spoke with such fervor, much like the other cadets who had returned from the Enterprise. Here at the Academy these youths were being taught what was needed to be good officers. Now, some of the students had learned and acquires those traits through experience, and not just through book learning. Which, at this important point of life, would make the strongest impression?

Each of those returning from Kirk's influence would make excellent officers, even now. Why fight against something that has helped these students come to value what were some truly important principles within the Federation: Honor, pride and trust. Trust in one's leaders was a treasured gift indeed. And if Kirk had done for the others what he had done for this man, then he was a hero indeed.

"I acknowledge that you have a very keen respect for Admiral Kirk, cadet Heim. And I can see that he has made a positive influence upon your life."

Realizing that this was as much of an apology as he was going to get, Heim nodded. "Thank you, sir."

"You may return to your seat, as we continue with the lecture." Casways added.

Again the curt nod. "Yes sir." Heim then seated himself, breathing out a sigh of intense relief.

The professor returned his attention to the huge monitor dominating one wall of the classroom. Away from the sight of the attentive students, he continued the lecture.

There was a smile of satisfaction on his lips.

YOU --

By Ginna LaCroix

Brown eyes alight with fire,
I worshipped you from afar.
You were older — wiser,
Not afraid of what they said,
Their taunting words never turning you from
Your dream, the quest
That you demanded also be mine.
You wanted me with you
Yet I could not go, for I was
Not yet ready to reject what I could never be.

Time melts away as suddenly
You stand before me,
Eyes still bright with fevered passion,
And I am again the boy I was
Those many years before.
A second chance to join you is given,
And I feel the same ache as before,
Not for you this time,
But for the man who stands at my side.
More than your passion,
I feel his pain.

"Shoot him!"
His words jar — so out of character,
Forced by anger fueled with desperation,
Unable to comprehend why I just stand
Staring into a fanatic's eyes
While only able to feel the burning
From eyes usually so understanding.
Your self-righteousness still fuels the torch,
Excusing all acts,
Even this —
No, I cannot kill you,
But I cannot go with you,
I must turn and face him,
His eyes dark pools of anger
And hurt —

AND HIM

He asks why,
But he does not hear my answer.
His eyes remain angry
But I force myself to hold them.
Although he was not the one to say it,
I **did** betray him,
Even though the enemy we now both face
Is my brother.

He talks of the necessity of pain —
And strength.
How often he has been strong for me,
Giving so much,
Asking so little.
I turn as you command me to follow,
Knowing what my answer must be,
Knowing you will not understand.
Your eyes cloud with puzzlement
As his glow with triumph.
My pain returns
But my choice was no choice,
I will remain at his side.

That pain grows as I perceive your destruction
You gave your life without understanding,
Never having had a chance to share,
To trust,
To love.
"Sybok. . . ."
His answer is quiet,
"I lost a brother once. . . ."
Sam — his love from a lost childhood
As I had worshipped you in mine.
But his answer was not complete —
"I was lucky — I got him back."
I raise my eyes and meet hazel ones
Soft with understanding.
I find words are unnecessary
As I acknowledge
My true brother.

PREDESTINED

By Mary Schuttler

Art by Sherry Veltkamp

James Kirk and Leonard McCoy took their places on the transporter pad. "Nice of Nogura to invite us to his little yachting party," McCoy drawled.

Kirk grinned in answer. "When does the Enterprise get within a day's shuttle away that we *don't* get invited to one of Nogura's public relations extravaganzas?"

"This is a new angle, though, isn't it?" McCoy inquired.

"Yes, I think this is the first one he's had aboard his personal yacht, though what the attraction is in the north Atlantic in mid-April is beyond me. You'd think he would have opted for a warmer climate."

"Keeps 'em concentrating on what he wants them to. Too cold to be out on deck admiring the scenery," McCoy guessed, grimacing at the thought.

"Energize, Lt. Rand," Kirk ordered.

Nothing in the transporter routine prepared Kirk for the weird disorientation he experienced during the beam-down. He was well acquainted with the normal period of non-existence that was so disconcerting to first-time transporters. But this time, he felt a curious sense of disembodied existence. The transition state seemed to drag on forever; in actuality, it lasted only a few seconds. He was washed with relief when the sensations finally passed into the normal feelings prior to coalescence.

As he materialized fully, gravity took charge and he was rudely dropped three feet to the deck, landing in an off-balanced crouch. As he straightened, he swore under his breath. "You can do better than that, Scotty," he muttered as he looked around. "Bones?"

"I beg your pardon?" a woman with a cultured voice asked from behind him. Kirk turned, and saw a woman in a very elegant, floor length dress with a plumed hat -- in fact, her clothes looked like a costume of some sort.

Kirk smiled politely. "I'm looking for Admiral Nogura," he explained.

"Why, I don't believe I know him," she replied, puzzled. "I'm sure I would have heard if there was an Admiral aboard."

"Ah, yes, thank you," Kirk backed away from her obvious eccentricity. He turned toward the railing, reveling in the rolling swells of the north Atlantic. Turning his eyes to the length of the ship stretching forward into the distance only reinforced his feeling that something was definitely wrong here. Nogura's yacht couldn't be this big! And beneath his feet was a shiny, real wood deck. What extravagance!

Then he took a good look at the people around him. Women strolled the decks wearing elaborate, long dresses, accompanied by men in dark colored suits with starched collars. The burgundy Starfleet uniform he wore definitely stood out. As he stood on the fantail looking out over the froth of waves behind the ship, he noted a pennant whipping in the wind. A single white star graced the red flag.

He began walking toward the bow, liking things less each minute. The deck vibrated under his feet. The hull of the ship sliced the gray water sharply, and the ship's pristine white iron railings stood out in stark relief against the gray north Atlantic skies. Kirk stared at the four enormous funnels penetrating the deck, three of them spewing black smoke into the air, betraying that this was no modern day ship.

Reaching the bow, he leaned out over the rail and scanned seven upside-down white letters painted on the black hull. They formed the word "Titanic". A chill swept Kirk that had nothing to do with the cool air fanning him, and ice water trickled in his veins. He swore once, violently. Several heads turned his way. Where was McCoy? Was he even on board?



McCoy had been a bit luckier than Kirk, landing safely on the promenade deck without the abrupt drop Kirk had sustained. He, like Kirk, soon discovered that apparently this was not Nogura's yacht, and that the people who surrounded him on the deck dressed and spoke very differently from him.

"Scotty, what have you done to us now with your infernal machine?" he wondered aloud, whistling softly through his teeth as he took in his luxurious surroundings. He wandered the deck like a tourist, searching each group of people for Kirk. People stared at him, and he began to feel uncomfortable in his uniform. What in the world had happened to Jim?

He turned his search inside. As he rambled down yet another dim corridor, a hand reached out from behind and clamped over his mouth, another gripping his elbow in a vise-like hold. He was hauled roughly into a dark linen closet. McCoy had only begun to struggle when the light blinked on and he was spun around to face Kirk.

"Jesus, Jim, don't do that to me," he exploded. "What are you doing sneaking around, anyway?"

"A deck steward's been following me for a half hour. He must think I'm a suspicious character."

"If you ask me, we're both damn suspicious," McCoy replied, straightening his clothing.

"We've got to get rid of these uniforms," Kirk stated, riffling through the shelves of bed linens in hopes of finding some period clothing, to no avail.

"What in the hell is going on, anyway?" McCoy grumbled.

Kirk suspended his search and faced McCoy. "Do you have any idea where we are?"

"None," the doctor replied.

"We're on the Titanic." Kirk began removing his rank insignias.

"We can't be," McCoy denied flatly, his face reflecting his horror of the very idea.

"Go look for yourself. We need to shed these uniforms and blend into the crowd."

McCoy gripped Kirk's arm. "We *need* to get the hell out of here. Do you know what's going to happen in a matter of days?"

"Maybe hours. Dammit, Bones, what do you suggest? Does *your* communicator work?" McCoy's hand dropped as he realized Kirk was right. There wasn't a blessed thing they could do. Kirk continued, "Be sure to keep it with you, just in case. And I suggest you get rid of that hardware. Remember the Prime Directive."

Automatically, McCoy's hands began fumbling for his own insignias. "And then what?"

Kirk shrugged. "We'll have to take this one step at a time. Let's split up and find some other clothes. I'll meet you back here in an hour."



Kirk struggled into the clothing he had found. The man he was "borrowing" them from was slightly taller than him, for the trouser legs piled up around his ankles, and a bit slimmer, which accounted for the way the waistband kept cutting into his stomach. The chambray shirt was a better fit. Kirk shrugged. They would have to do.

He cautiously opened the door and looked both ways before he exited into the narrow corridor. After leaving McCoy, he had found a staircase and descended deep into the ship, reasoning there was less chance of his getting caught that way.

But when he retraced his steps using another staircase, a new problem presented itself. Halfway up the stairs, a man wearing the ship's uniform approached him. "Here, where do you think you're going?"

"Me? I'm meeting a friend up topside."

"Sure you are. Get back down there."

Kirk drew himself up. "And why should I?"

The steward laughed, his face displaying an ugly smile. "You don't belong up here in first class. That's obvious." His laughing demeanor disappeared. "Do you want me to call the Purser?"

In dawning disgust, Kirk realized the problem. A social class system evidently barred him from the upper regions of the ship. He had stolen clothing from the wrong type of man if he hoped to return to the upper decks. He clutched the steward's arm, noting the badge on his chest which identified him as Miles Talbot. "Look, Talbot, I have to see the captain right away."

"Oh, the Captain, is it? I think I can safely speak for him when I say he has no business with the likes of you. Now be on your way!" the steward reprimanded as he gave Kirk a hard shove.

Kirk staggered and saved himself from a nasty backwards fall down the stairs by grabbing the handrail, surprised by the steward's open hostility. His balance regained, he clenched his fists reflexively, and the two exchanged heated glares. The situation seemed ready to flare into open conflict when Kirk felt a small hand slip through the crook of his arm smoothly.

"Come along, now, we're late to dinner," a soft, thickly accented voice admonished him. Turning, he saw a small female, perhaps in her early '20s. Her lively blue eyes and vivid red hair were the first thing Kirk noticed about her. The second was that she was very pregnant. He allowed her to steer him gently away from the glowering Talbot, humoring the silent plea in her haunting blue eyes.

"And what *do* you need to see the captain about?" she asked, with curiosity, as they strolled back down the corridor with Talbot's pig-like eyes boring into their backs.

"I need to give him a little advice on how to navigate." Kirk smiled to soften his sarcasm.

A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. "I'm Constance Conway," she volunteered. "And who might you be?"

"Jim Kirk," he replied.

"Ah, Jimmy's a grand name. My dad's name was Jimmy, too. He's gone now, but not forgotten."

"Why did you interfere?"

Her eyes grew troubled. "That man's trouble, no two ways about it. Spends his time patrolling the third class decks, baiting all the young gentlemen. Picked a fight with Paddy Burke the first night on board. Broke his nose, he did, and cut him up bad with that knife he carries. T'will do you no good to tangle with him," she finished.

Indignant by her nonchalant acceptance of the situation, Kirk asked, "Why don't you report him to the authorities?"

She stopped short, amazed. "And why should they care? It happens all the time, you know that."

He changed the subject abruptly. "What's your destination, Constance?"

"Oh, call me Connie, everyone does. To answer your question, America, of course. The land of golden opportunity. I'm joining my husband there," she informed him proudly. "He has a job in Cleveland. That's in Ohio." Kirk smiled. "It's a good job, too. But what about you? Where are you bound?"

A rueful expression swept Kirk's face. "At the moment, I'm way off course," he replied mysteriously. He took Connie's elbow. "Look, is there somewhere we can sit down . . . maybe have a cup of coffee? I could use one."

"Sure. This way." She guided him down a confusing avenue of corridors to the third class dining salon. The sounds of singing, a violin, and feet stomping drifted from somewhere nearby. Kirk peered around curiously. Long lines of ornate wooden stools were bolted to the deck, joggling the captain's memory of the way everything used to be fastened down on ships.

Connie loaded her coffee with cream and sugar, and sipped it thoughtfully. The mellow lamplight shone on her strawberry colored hair, done up tightly in braids and wrapped around her head. "So tell me about yourself, Jimmy. How did you come to be on the Titanic today, and what do you intend to do when we reach America?"

A pang of remorse shot through Kirk in response to her question. He wondered what she would say if he told her the ship would never reach America. It was distressing to look at the people around him and wonder whether they would be among the survivors or not. He was silent so long, Connie's gentle touch on his arm finally jerked him back to the present. "You don't have to answer if you don't want to. I didn't mean to pry."

Kirk realized she had taken his silence as a reprimand for her personal questions. He summoned his most charming smile. "I'd rather hear about you. Is this your first child?"

Her face lit up with typical vibrancy. "Yes, it is. Sean is hoping for a boy, but I'll be happy either way." She sobered, placing her hands, fingers splayed, over her abdomen. "This child will be born in America, and he will have a future," she predicted vehemently, her face reflecting memories of the life she was leaving behind which Kirk could only guess at.

Kirk regarded her determined face, in awe of her pioneering spirit. Then a quick glance around him reminded him of the urgency of his mission. He raised his cup, steam curling around his face. "How can I get to the upper decks? It's very important," he stressed.

She looked around furtively. "You can't go up there, Jimmy. If that steward catches you, he'll have you locked in the cargo hold for sure. He has a mean look in his eye, and he doesn't like our people," she warned.

Kirk's brow furrowed at the phrase 'our people', then cleared as he realized how Connie meant the term. With a name like 'Kirk', and the way he was dressed, why wouldn't she address him as a fellow Irishman? He had forgotten how ethnically oriented people of this era had been. "You let me worry about that. Just tell me how to get there."

Connie chewed on her lip thoughtfully. "There's a stairway on the left . . . port? . . . side of the ship. It's kept locked, but I noticed the lock doesn't work right. It pops right back open after they lock it. The steward never notices. I'll show you where it is, but oh, do have a care, Jimmy," she finished, her blue eyes alight with concern. Her hand rested lightly on his arm, demonstrating her distress.

He squeezed her clutching hand. "Don't worry. You just show me where this stairway is. I'll do the rest."



Kirk ducked into the linen closet and clicked the door shut, groping for the string which operated the light.

"I was about to give up on you," McCoy's voice boomed from the depths of the closet.

Kirk switched on the light. "I had a run in with a deck steward. Evidently all men are not created equal on this ship," he observed. He let out a low whistle as he took in McCoy's elaborate garb. "Whose clothes did you steal?"

"I don't know, but it took me a devil of a long time to figure out how to get into them, and an even longer time to find my way back here." McCoy ran a finger under the uncomfortably stiff collar cutting into his neck. "Jim, are you going to tell the captain what's going to happen?"

Kirk's lips tightened grimly. "I'm going to try. Were you able to find out what day it is?"

"April 14, 1912. And . . ." he announced, drawing aside his coat to reveal a delicate gold chain, he fished out a gleaming gold object from his vest pocket. The cover popped open with a light touch of his finger. ". . . it's 9:30 PM," he finished.

"Damn. We don't have much time." They left the closet and began to make their way toward the deck and ultimately the bridge. "History wasn't my best subject. I don't remember exactly when this is supposed to happen, but I know this date's right." They strode rapidly toward the stern. The deck was essentially deserted during the dinner hour.

"What about changing history?"

"Can you sit back and let this disaster happen without intervening?"

McCoy's face reflected his inner turmoil. "Of course not, but if you succeed, countless people that should have died will live. Some very influential people, if I remember correctly. We're bound to change the course of history if we do this. Possibly to the point where we don't exist any more."

Kirk halted and swung to face McCoy. "It's a chance we'll have to take, Bones. I've faced this situation before, remember?" Vestiges of remembered pain over the death of Edith Keeler played across Kirk's expressive face. "I've been tortured ever since, wondering if I did the right thing. I can't stand by and let this happen. I can't live with something of this magnitude," he warned, gripping the doctor's arm.

McCoy's vivid blue eyes bored into Kirk's. "Neither could I," he replied, the tone of his voice indicating the pain lived on in him also. They resumed walking, silent now.

Kirk sensed, rather than heard, a presence behind them. A hand grasped his elbow and roughly spun him around. "I thought I told you that there's no place up here for you." It was Talbot. He shoved his face pugnaciously into Kirk's and jammed a finger into his chest. "What's your name, boy?"

Kirk's fist clenched reflexively at his side, and he drew himself up to his full height, which was considerably more than the short, dumpy Talbot. "My name," he replied scornfully, "is James T. Kirk."

"Well, James T. Kirk," Talbot mocked just as scornfully, "you're trespassing up here." Talbot's hand moved surreptitiously inside his coat, and Kirk's sharp eyes caught the movement as his hand hovered over the hilt of a sheathed dagger hanging well back out of easy view, but there nevertheless. He tensed, all instincts at red-alert. Kirk's eyes locked with Talbot's, the steward's glittering with racial hatred.

"Now just one damn minute here," McCoy stepped forward. "This man is . . . he's my servant," McCoy protested, drawing a sidelong glance from Kirk but plunging ahead with the deception. "I need him to help me with my . . . my grape cuttings," he improvised wildly. "I would never allow such delicate plants to be placed in the cargo hold."

To McCoy's astonishment, Talbot did not batten an eye at the wild tale. He backed up slowly from Kirk, still making arrogant eye contact, but addressing his reply to McCoy. "I see, sir. Might I suggest you take care of the matter as quickly as possible so that your man can return to his place?" He gave McCoy an ingratiating smile. "Just a suggestion, sir."

He turned back to Kirk. "And see that you stay below after that, you damned mick, or I'll fix you," he threatened under his breath.

Kirk's expression was coldly angry as he took a step toward the retreating back of the rotund crewman. He wasn't sure what name he had been called, but he was damn sure it was not complimentary. McCoy's grip on his arm forced a quick return to reason. "We've got more pressing problems than him, Jim," McCoy reminded.

Kirk visibly forced himself to relax tensed muscles. "Right. Let's find the bridge."





McCoy and Kirk soon found themselves at the glassed in area of the bridge. Kirk tapped gently at the door, and it was answered by a young man in a crisp uniform. "May I speak to the Captain please?" Kirk requested politely.

The officer's eyes flickered over Kirk briefly. "He's not on duty right now. Can I help you?"

"Are you in charge?"

"I am. Second Officer Lightoller here."

Kirk grasped the officer's arm lightly. "You've received warnings . . . about ice?"

Lightoller's eyes reflected surprise, but he smiled reassuringly. "Just routine, I assure you. Nothing to be alarmed about."

"Have you reduced speed?" McCoy put in.

The young officer switched his gaze to McCoy. "There's nothing to worry about, sir. The captain is aware of the ice warnings, and has taken them into consideration when setting our course and speed. It's not unusual in the north Atlantic this time of year."

Kirk tightened his grip. "Contact the captain, Lightoller. Ask him to reduce his speed and double the watch. I *know* what I'm talking about."

Lightoller's face lost its polite detachment. "Who *are* you?"

Before Kirk could reply, Talbot appeared, pushing his way between them. "I'll take him away, sir. I've warned this man, but he seems to be a born troublemaker." Talbot grasped Kirk's arm in an attempt to restrain him, but Kirk wrenched away angrily. Lightoller held out a placating hand.

"It's quite all right, Talbot. I want to hear what he has to say." Talbot's face flushed with anger, and he stalked off muttering to himself.

"Thank you. Look, I know it's hard to believe, but would it hurt anything to do as I suggested?" Kirk pressed.

Lightoller's eyes searched Kirk's face. "I appreciate your concern. I really do. But the captain has left his orders for the evening and retired. He has altered our course slightly south due to the ice warnings. If we can hold speed, we'll set a new record for the north Atlantic crossing," he explained.

Kirk's hazel eyes bored into Lightoller's light blue ones. "Do you want to set that record so badly you'll endanger the lives of the passengers of this vessel?" he demanded.

Lightoller raised a reassuring hand. "The speed record is not our main concern, it's purely secondary. Every precaution has been taken with regard to the ice. Surely you've heard the fact that the Titanic is virtually unsinkable."

McCoy leaned in close. "Don't you believe it," he retorted, grabbing Kirk's arm. "Come on, Jim, they aren't interested in listening to common sense. But if I were you, I'd count my life boats," he flung over his shoulder.

Lightoller stared at the retreating backs of the two odd men intently.

"Rather creepy, those two, eh?" the helmsman, who had overheard the whole exchange, remarked.

Lightoller continued to stare for a moment, then visibly shook off the eerie sensation the two had left in their wake. "Rather," he agreed mildly, turning back to his work, but he continued to think about the unsettling experience.



Kirk and McCoy made their way toward the dining salon, dejected over their failure to persuade caution from the Second Officer. "They're so complacent, they won't even listen," Kirk fumed.

McCoy laid a placating hand on Kirk's shoulder. "Let's get something to eat. Maybe we'll both feel better if we have a little nourishment."

"I doubt it," Kirk replied glumly, but allowed his friend to guide him toward the appetizing smells drifting through the ornate wooden and glass doors. They were further incensed when Kirk was refused admission to the dining hall.

McCoy's face flushed with anger. "Wait here, Jim." He shouldered his way through the crowd to the bar, his belligerent expression a warning to any who might approach him. "Fix me a couple of sandwiches and two beers . . . two *ales* . . . to go, and make it snappy," he ordered.

"To go, sir?" The bartender's face wrinkled in puzzlement.

"Wrap them up, I'm taking them with me," McCoy snapped impatiently.

"Very good, sir," the man hastily replied, hurrying off to do his bidding.

McCoy returned to the deck to find Kirk leaning against the rail, staring moodily out into the darkness. Light streaming from the portholes below made round beads of sparkling iridescence on the otherwise inky black ocean, like a glistening chain. Their breath showed in little puffs of steam in the brisk night air. "Here, Jim." McCoy thrust a sandwich at Kirk, who took it absently. "Damn bunch of bigots," he grouched, opening his own sandwich and tearing off a large bite. "How can they stand being so narrow minded?"

"Prejudice is not dead in our times, Bones. Just a hell of a lot more subtle."

McCoy had no answer for that, and silently chewed his sandwich. "Do you think any of this is *real*?"

Kirk took a swig of beer and winced at its strength. "I'm afraid to take a chance that it might not be." His fist slammed the rail in frustration. "Dammit, Bones, there must be a way."

"Short of storming the bridge and taking control of the ship, I don't see how," McCoy remarked around a bite of chicken salad. A sudden light gleamed in Kirk's eyes. "Oh, now wait a minute, Jim. What good would two men be against that many?" he argued, knowing even as he did so that when Kirk got that look in his eye, he had made up his mind.

Kirk rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "What we need is a weapon of some kind. Something to tip the scales in our favor. What I wouldn't give for just one phaser right now."

"Jim, this is insane," McCoy maintained, the sandwich suddenly tasting dry. "You'll get us both killed."

Kirk favored the doctor with a piercing stare. "We'll probably die anyway, Bones. This ship is going to the bottom in a matter of hours, and us and hundreds of other people with it," he reminded the doctor.

McCoy swallowed. "Where do we start?" he asked, signifying his reluctant assistance.

Kirk nodded thoughtfully. "They must be carrying weapons on board, but they'll be locked up. That's our best chance. All I need to do is get the keys to the Purser's Office."

"Oh well, if that's all," he threw his hand jauntily into the air.

Kirk drew him along the deck at a fast walk. McCoy ditched the remains of the sandwich over the side and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, trying to keep up with Kirk's brisk stride. "Have you figured out what you're going to do when we've secured the bridge? I mean, do you even know how to *run* this ship?"

Kirk swung around in mid-stride to give McCoy a long look. The beginnings of a mischievous smile quirked his mouth. "Please, Bones! I *am* a captain!"

An answering grin split McCoy's face, surprising him. It was a tribute to Jim that in the face of what might be their last hours of life, he had the fortitude to joke. And come to think of it, his own response had surprised him, for he hadn't known he had the heart to respond.



Rand felt tears of frustration gather in her eyes as she answered Spock yet again. "I don't remember anything unusual in the beaming process at all, sir," she repeated. Spock had been subjecting her to an intense interrogation, firing questions at her non-stop for a solid ten minutes, his eyes sharp and eager to catch any inconsistency in her replies. The severity of the cross examination was making her fearful that she had somehow slipped up. "All I know was that the beam echo didn't bounce back as usual. That's when I notified the bridge."

Rand relived the growing apprehension she had felt after beaming Captain Kirk and Doctor McCoy down to Earth, and waiting in vain for the beam echo, a little signal which normally bounced back to the transporter station at once, indicating that the travelers had safely arrived.

When the seconds had stretched into a full half-minute without the echo, Rand poised her hand above the intercom button. At precisely one minute, when a muted, much delayed echo had finally come through, she had stabbed that button, apprehensive over what she had to report.

"What were the conditions on the planet below at the time of beam down?" Spock rapped out.

"There was a force five electrical storm going on at the beam down coordinates. But we've dealt with much greater disruption than that before, and successfully."

Spock leaned his elbows on the table, steeping his fingers thoughtfully. Finally he said, "Thank you, Lieutenant. That will be all." Rand made a grateful escape.

Spock swiveled his chair to the right. "Mr. Scott, are you of the opinion that the storm is the major contributing factor in the disappearance of the captain and Dr. McCoy?"

"It's the *only* factor that makes any sense. I've nearly torn that transporter to bits since they beamed down. All equipment is functioning normally. There's not a quark outta' sync. It *must* have been the storm. And based on my examinations, I'm also of the opinion that they're safe and sound and in one piece, wherever they are. The beam echo *did* come through, even though they're not on Nogura's yacht."

Spock stared intently at the opposite wall as he often did when he was deep in thought. "Wherever they are - that is the problem, is it not? The delay on the return bounce seems to indicate they were beamed a lot further than the original coordinates." He paused, introspective again, then continued. "Mr. Scott, would you please assist me in setting up a series of experiments?"

Scott's broad face beamed. "Gladly, Mr. Spock!"



Obtaining the keys to the Purser's Office had turned out to be ridiculously easy. The officer's cabin was clearly marked, and after a quick tap on the door to determine he was not within, Kirk bent down level with the door knob. "Keep watch, Bones," he ordered.

McCoy did his best to look casual, but could not help feeling they presented a criminal appearance. The corridor remained deserted, however, and within a couple of minutes, the lock gave with a soft click and the door swung open. "Sometime you'll have to tell me where you picked up that particular ability," McCoy hissed, nodding toward the door.

"Sherlock Holmes."

"What?"

"Novels, Bones. We'll discuss it later," Kirk stalled, rifling drawers methodically. He found what he was looking for in the desk drawer. "Aha." He held up a ring from which jangled several metallic objects. "I knew any officer worth his commission would have extra keys tucked away somewhere."

The Purser's Office proved to be a bit trickier, since it was near the bridge, which was manned at all times. They managed to slip in unnoticed between the comings and goings of the crew, and Kirk groped his way through the room using the faint light filtering through the leaded window. He found the locked gun cabinet; one of the keys on the ring fitting it perfectly. Selecting two firearms, he fumbled through a drawer until he was sure he had the right ammunition. Passing one gun to McCoy, he gestured to the doctor to conceal his weapon and follow.

They crept from the darkened office until they were once again safe in the anonymity of the few people strolling the deck. The sky was clear, the air crisp and biting, and the sea spread out from the ship as flat and unmoving as a plain. A million stars twinkled above, their pinpoints of light sharpened by the moonless night.

As the two Enterprise officers began moving toward the bridge, a faint shout rang out from the bow of the ship, and three accompanying sharp rings sounded from inside the glassed-in bridge area. Kirk's eyes flew to McCoy, and they exchanged looks of dawning horror. They were too late to avoid the disaster! A scant thirty seconds later, the ship gave a faint but fateful shudder as it grazed the unseen iceberg. The two ran to the starboard side just in time to see the deadly chunk of ice vanish astern, bearing a telltale streak of paint.

Moments later, the steady vibration of the engines ceased. The two drew back from their precarious lean over the rail. "What do we do now?" McCoy asked.

Kirk passed his hand over his face and sighed. "What time is it?"

"Eleven-forty."

"There won't be much we can do, Bones, but what we can do, we will. This ship only carries enough lifeboats for half the people on board."

McCoy's explosive curse echoed in the still night air. The ship was gliding to a smooth stop, and a few passengers ran to the rail to investigate. First Officer Murdoch had emerged from the bridge to circulate among the passengers, reassuring them. "It's only an iceberg. Nothing to be alarmed about."

Kirk approached Murdoch. "Where is the captain?"

"He's below, meeting with the ship's builder, Mr. Andrews, to determine what, if any, damage has been done. Nothing to be alarmed about," the first officer assured.

"What, if any, damage . . ." Kirk echoed incredulously, only to break off. "This ship will be gone in a matter of a few hours! You need to make the most of every second you have between now and then."

Murdoch stepped closer, alarm apparent in his expression now. "Please lower your voice, sir. We don't need anyone going around spreading rumors like that. I assure you, there's nothing to be concerned about," he reiterated. At that moment, Captain Smith appeared, looking grim.

"I want to speak with the captain," Kirk stated, starting toward the distinguished, white-bearded figure.

Murdoch snagged his arm. "Please don't bother the captain now. He's fully occupied with the condition of the ship." Kirk pulled away from Murdoch as Captain Smith disappeared into the Wireless room.

Kirk and McCoy found a place by the rail out of the way, and impatiently waited for the crew to make a move toward the boats. Fifteen minutes passed . . . twenty . . . with no sign of activity other than the crew being alerted. The officer's began to assume grim expressions. Kirk approached Murdoch again. "Are we abandoning ship?"

"Oh, no. We'll be under way shortly. The captain is assessing the damage."

Kirk gritted his teeth at the lie. "The captain is trying to figure out how long this ship will still be afloat. I can answer that for him -- *not long*. Tell him to start abandon ship procedures at once," Kirk urged.

Murdoch stared, wondering who this man was, and how he could possibly know what was going on when only the officers did. "I'll pass along your suggestion to the captain," he promised.

"Thanks," Kirk replied tightly. He returned to McCoy, waiting at the rail. "What time is it now?"

McCoy again consulted the gold timepiece with the name 'Benjamin J. Guggenheim' inscribed inside the cover. "Twelve midnight."

Kirk's fingers drummed nervously on the rail. "When are they going to move?" he fretted. "They haven't even informed the passengers. Half of them aren't even aware that anything happened."

"They're probably trying to avoid creating a panic," McCoy guessed.

Kirk leaned out over the rail and looked forward at the bow of the ship, already settled nearly twenty feet lower than normal. "If they wait much longer, even the slowest passenger will figure it out for himself," he observed.

It was nearly fifteen more minutes before crewmen began uncovering the lifeboats, and the first passengers appeared on deck wearing life jackets. Some had been asleep and looked bewildered, others not yet retired for the night appeared in their evening clothes, rowdy and laughing.

"Come on, Bones, let's see if they could use a hand," Kirk said as he observed the crew's preparations. Further conversation became impossible as the ship began blowing off huge, noisy clouds of steam from her funnels.

Kirk snagged the arm of Second Officer Lightoller, whom he had earlier tried to warn on the bridge. "What can we do to help?" he shouted.

Lightoller paused only a few moments to evaluate Kirk's sincerity. "Help me keep this crowd in order. Your companion can do the same for First Officer Murdoch on the port side."

Kirk moved to Lightoller's side, gazing momentarily after the disappearing figure of McCoy as he hurried toward the port side. He had only a moment to wish they had not been separated before.

Lightoller began his brief instruction to the crew. "Women and children first, and keep your heads. If you remain calm, the passengers will too. That's it, men. Let's get to it."

Rockets began to pierce the night sky from the starboard side boat deck. In their nightmarish glare, Kirk worked feverishly with Lightoller as he barked orders to ready the first lifeboat. Bewildered passengers continued to straggle out onto deck, feeling foolish in the awkward life preservers they wore. "Captain's orders, ma'am, Captain's orders," the crewmen parroted, gently urging the ladies toward the boats.

Finally, the boat was in position and Lightoller began loading women and children into it. Kids grinned and pointed at the streaking rockets in delight. Lightoller had to beg most of the passengers to board the boat; most of them preferred the relative safety of the big ship.

Kirk tried to convince more people to board, in vain. "I dislike this lifejacket intensely! It's uncomfortable, and I absolutely refuse to wear it any longer," a matronly woman informed Kirk.

"Captain's orders, ma'am. Into the boat, please," he imitated the crewmen's spiel.

"I refuse!" she cried staunchly.

Kirk grasped her arm none too gently, propelling her forward so that she had no choice but to enter the boat or topple over the side. "Well, I never!" she huffed, even as she bullied her way toward the front of the boat.

"Ten more ladies, please. Ten more ladies," Kirk called, but only a few came forward. Lightoller eventually made the decision to lower the boat with only twenty-eight aboard.

"What's its capacity?" Kirk demanded over the melee.

"Sixty-five," Lightoller shouted back.

"For God's sake, man, wait till it's full!" Kirk exploded.

Lightoller craned his neck, looking for more willing passengers, but they hugged the ship's superstructure fearfully. He shrugged, turning toward the crewmen and giving the "lower away" signal to the waiting crewman.

Kirk made a muffled exclamation of outrage and turned away. The loading operations continued. Yet another boat was loaded and lowered with only forty-one aboard, and the one after that with a mere thirty-two passengers. Kirk made numerous efforts to convince Lightoller to place more people in the boats, but even though the ship's bow was nearly awash, people were still reluctant to board. "I should like to be with my friend," one lady told Kirk. "She's in that boat," she pointed.

"Please, you must board the boat now," Kirk urged.

"But . . ."

"Lady, get in the boat, now," Kirk ordered, intimidation evident in his voice.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, hurriedly moving to the rail.

During the entire loading procedure, the ship's band played lively ragtime tunes in the first-class lounge, and passengers milled on the deck, talking and laughing to cover their uneasiness. There was as yet no panic, for no passenger thought the ship would sink before they received assistance from some other vessel. Kirk wondered if McCoy and Murdoch were having as much trouble loading their boats as he and Lightoller were.

Another lifeboat was fitted into the davits for lowering, and loading progressed slowly. Snatches of conversations reached Kirk's ear. A woman sobbed, and a man's voice reassured, "Be brave, my dear. I'll get a place in another boat."

A regal looking couple joined the seven crew members already aboard, and after persuading only three more people to board, Lightoller gave the order to lower. Kirk grabbed the Second Officer's arm, dragging him away from the milling crowd to relative privacy, and exploded in his face. "Dammit, Lightoller, you're throwing away these people's chance to survive! You know as well as I do there's not nearly enough boats to rescue everyone on the ship, yet you let this one leave with only twelve aboard!"

Lightoller leaned in toward Kirk, his face hard with anger and frustration. "I know it. God, don't I know it," he replied, his voice filled with agony. "But what can I do if they refuse to board? Should I shoot them?"

The two men stared at each other for a few moments, both overwrought with the tragedy surrounding them and their own helplessness. Then Kirk said brusquely, "Let's get back to those boats and do what we can."

The tilt of the deck was growing steadily steeper, and the ship began listing to port. It became easier to persuade passengers to board the lifeboats as evidence that the ship was in serious trouble became apparent, and finally the boats were leaving full. A few scant minutes later, the list had shifted to the starboard side, and the first signs of panic among those aboard became obvious.

A tall man approached the boat, herding his small family before him, and carrying a sleeping boy. He handed his wife and two daughters into the boat, and Kirk watched while he fervently kissed his son goodbye and passed the sleeping child to him. He handed the child gently to his mother, and told the man as kindly as he could to stand clear. The boat began to descend in a series of downward jerks, and the father gave a jaunty wave to his disappearing family. As soon as they were out of sight, the man's face assumed the grim expression he had forced away for his wife's benefit. Clearly, he knew there was no hope. Kirk's heart wrenched within him.

As Lightoller prepared to lower boat number nine, a group of passengers appeared ready to jump into the already full boat, and Lightoller drew his pistol and fired shots into the air in warning. "Back, all of you! Wait your turn. Be calm," he barked, knowing with a wrenching certainty that most of them would never have a turn.

Once again, the boat began to descend. Kirk held up his hand suddenly. "Hold it!" He leaned over the rail, yanking a head scarf from a young man's head. "Out of that boat," he roared. "Women and children only."

"No, no! Let me stay in the boat," he sobbed.

Kirk grabbed the man's coat and hauled him back on deck. "One more woman for this boat," he called. The crowd surged forward as ten women vied for the place. Kirk handed the nearest one into the boat. "All right, lower away, Lightoller."

Lifeboats were still being launched with places left empty, but now it was due to the hurry to get the lifeboats away, not because of the reluctance of the passengers. The cold Atlantic lapped only ten feet below the Promenade Deck now, and Kirk and Lightoller worked at a feverish pace. The crowd grew more unruly, and men -- rough looking customers -- began to grumble as more and more women and children boarded.

Finally, only one boat remained to be launched, and the crowd roared threateningly, looking as if it might make a run on the boat. Lightoller waved his pistol in the air, and crew members formed a circle around the boat with arms locked together, allowing only women and children to board.

It was then, as Kirk stood linked with the other crewmen in a dangerous attempt to stem the surging crowd, that he heard his name called, a thready high pitched "Jimmy!" carrying over the general pandemonium.

He leaned this way and that, trying to catch a glimpse of the caller. Eventually, he spied the pinched, white face of Constance Conway, pressed against the metal bars blocking her and dozens of others from gaining the first-class decks. Kirk broke free from the chain of crewmen, cursing himself for his stupidity. How could the fact have escaped him that they were loading predominantly first-class passengers? How many countless second and third class passengers were trapped below decks?

He raced to the gangway, and Connie's hand reached through, clutching at his arm, panic-stricken. "Jimmy!" she exclaimed again, a passionate appeal for help. He rattled the bars, but they held tight. "Stand back," he shouted several times, and finally the crowd pushing and shoving behind Connie sullenly withdrew a little.

Kirk withdrew his secreted weapon, and taking careful aim, shot the lock open and wrenched the metal bars back. The crowd surged forward with a mighty roar, and Connie fell into his arms.

"Are you all right?" he shouted.

She nodded vigorously, unable to make herself heard. Kirk gripped her arm tightly and hurried her toward the waiting lifeboat. Lightoller held up his hand. "This one's full. It won't hold any more."

Kirk pressed Connie toward the boat. "There's room for her, Lightoller."

"I'm afraid not," the officer began, then stopped short as he stared down the barrel of the pistol.

"She's getting on," Kirk maintained grimly. Lightoller raised his hands and backed off, his blue eyes wary now.

Kirk steadied Connie's arm as she boarded the boat, careful to keep the pistol trained unobtrusively on Lightoller. Once seated, Connie turned a tearful face up to him. "Oh, Jimmy, how

can I thank you? God protect you, and bless you," she called fervently as the boat began dropping from sight.

Kirk threw her a jaunty smile. "Have a fine baby, Connie, and take care of that husband of yours!" The last he saw of her was her watery, grateful smile.

Lowering the pistol, he began to turn toward Lightoller when someone slipped up behind him and growled, "I saw what you did, you damned scum. Keeping decent folk off the boat so your Irish doxy can board!" Kirk turned only enough to perceive that it was Talbot snarling in his ear, and that he had a wicked knife pressed against his back. A searing pain tore through his shoulder. He felt the blade of the knife scrape across bone and bury itself deeply in his flesh. He cried out, a hoarse yell of pain that was lost in the general uproar of the panicked passengers. The deck rushed up and slammed into him.

His shoulder was on fire. The crowd surged around and over him, and someone carelessly trod on his hand. He curled up reflexively, and underneath him the deck gave a sudden upward heave as it tipped more sharply. A chorus of panicked screams split the air, only to be drowned out by the thunderous roar of the ship's giant engines tearing loose and plummeting forward. The lights blinked once and went out for good, to the accompaniment of another series of screams. All the boats were gone now, though whether the crowd fully comprehended this was doubtful.

People clawed their way desperately up the slippery deck, trampling Kirk and anything else that got in their way. Deck chairs slid past, crashing into him, then continuing on their way into the inky water yawning only yards from him. Bedlam reigned as the crowd pushed and showed their way toward the stern. People began jumping from the side of the ship, plummeting into the inky water with shrieks, and shinnying down the ropes dangling over the sides. Kirk fought desperately to stay conscious, knowing he must rouse himself enough to find McCoy and get clear of the ship. Her final minutes were at hand, her death throes horrifying to behold.

Kirk dragged himself to his elbows and looked behind him. The water washed against the deck in a bubbling froth. To his horror, he watched the deck separate just under the water lapping against it, and the whole forward section of the ship broke away.

Relieved of the drag of the flooded front portion of the ship, the stern righted itself somewhat. A horrendous wrenching metal sound split the air, and Kirk glanced upward to see the ship's last remaining funnel teetering above him, throwing a cloud of sparks as it toppled.

In desperation, he forced himself to his feet and staggered toward the rail, holding his shoulder to stem the flowing blood. The ship tilted again, and before he could grip the rail or regain his balance, he was pitched over the side. The icy water was like a numbing slap. He was drawn down, in a whirlpool of water, swirling round and round in the suction of the fallen funnel, which had missed him by only fifteen or twenty feet.

Weakly, he struggled to the surface and found that not ten feet away from where he surfaced was an overturned lifeboat with several men clinging to it. Kirk struck out for the welcome sight, limping along with only one hand to propel him through the water.



Spock ran a hasty series of experiments with the transporter, using an artificial source of energy to recreate the electrical storm, which had evidently interfered with the beam-down. The data gathered

from these experiments would be so inconclusive it was nearly worthless, in his opinion, but he kept his disquieting doubts to himself and pressed doggedly on.

Using one of the block-like items used to test the transporter's safe operation, Spock had intersected it with an artificial lightning bolt, which he had channeled through a phaser rifle for control and jury-rigged a timer to the trigger for split-second precision.

He and Scott looked expectantly to the other side of the room where the block should have appeared if the beaming process was unaffected by the energy surge. There was nothing there.

Scott made an exclamation of surprise, but Spock was grimly silent. "But where is it?" Scott turned to Spock, hands on hips.

"If my calculations are correct, Mr. Scott, it is somewhere in the past."

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed.



Minutes in the icy water seemed like hours as they dragged by, and Kirk turned his face toward the Titanic to witness the final curtain ring down on the tragedy, not wanting to watch, but unable to turn away. Groups of people huddled on the ship in clusters as the slant of the deck reached a terrifying angle. Then, mercifully, the ship pivoted in the water, turning its deck away from Kirk and the men clinging to the fragile boat, as if to spare them the awful sight.

The undertow began dragging the lifeboat toward the doomed ship, and with a terrified shout, the survivors desperately rowed to escape it. At one point, Kirk looked upward to find they were right under the three enormous propellers. For an instant, he was sure they were going to come right down on top of them. After a minute of frantic rowing, they broke free of the undertow and paused, gasping, to observe the ship again. At last, with a muffled sound, the last remaining bulkheads gave way and the ship slid quietly into the sea.

A momentary hush fell over the water, so profound it might have been a memorial service. Almost immediately, the night was filled with the wails and moans of the floating survivors, which continued to grow in number and anguish until they resembled a long, continuous wailing chant. Kirk rested his head against the bobbing boat, doing his best to hold on with one hand, and drifted in and out of consciousness.

Then, with a start, he was fully conscious, and realized he had slipped from his precarious position clinging to the edge of the lifeboat, and it had drifted out of his reach. Again, he struck out toward its beckoning safety, but this time he lacked the strength to make any progress in the numbing water.

His struggles became weaker and weaker, and it began to seem like it might be good just to slip under, to let the sea become his resting place along with the hundreds of others that night. He only hoped that somehow, Bones had managed to make it into one of the lifeboats.

"Jim!"

A voice was calling his name, but it did not, at first, penetrate the stupor he had fallen into.

"Jim!" The voice sounded again, this time closer, more insistent. Then someone was beside him in the water, pulling his limp arm around a welcome pair of shoulders, struggling to work his own life jacket around Kirk's neck.

"Bones," he managed to croak, gratefully clinging to the doctor with his good hand. McCoy began towing his friend to a floating piece of debris, and after a few minutes of laborious effort, they reached its relative safety.



Spock moved to the transporter station, punching a few selected buttons. "I have entered their coordinates when we beamed them down, allowing for the fact that they could possibly have drifted from that location. I have programmed the scanners to expand outward in a ripple pattern until it encounters their communicator's signal."

He paused. "This process should undoubtedly be tested more thoroughly before we risk the captain and Dr. McCoy's life on its outcome."

"Aye," Scott agreed, cocking an eyebrow at the Vulcan curiously.

Spock's lips compressed into a tight, thin line. "However, it is expedient to retrieve them as quickly as possible. Mr. Scott, will you please man the transporter, and I will operate the other equipment."

Scott took his place behind the transporter station, waiting for Spock's nod of readiness. Receiving it, he gently began nudging the controls upward, like a violinist playing a hundred year old instrument.

"Here's hoping," Scott breathed prayerfully. Spock remained silent, preferring to have something a little more solid than hope to rescue his comrades with.

Scott monitored the readouts non-stop. "I've got something, but I dinna ken what," he warned. Spock watched his readouts with equal care, sending the artificial bolt into the transporter beam at precisely the moment he had calculated it would be most effective.

Something began to form on the transporter pattern, but it was obviously not a human. Both officers rushed toward it before the transporter effect had fully faded.

Spock picked up the object, turning it this way and that. It was a mangled wooden folding-type chair, and besides being broken, it was also wet with sea water. When Spock turned it over, the words "R.M.S. Titanic" could be seen stenciled on the back.

"Mr. Spock!" Scott exclaimed in dread.

Spock raced back to his equipment. "Quickly, Mr. Scott. We haven't much time."





"What happened to you, Jim?" McCoy gasped, staring at the spreading pool of red that reappeared each time the water washed it away.

"Talbot," Kirk managed to say.

McCoy cursed and got a firmer grip on Kirk and the wreckage. Even if Kirk was uninjured, he knew neither one of them could last long in the numbing cold of the north Atlantic water. They had had some close calls in the past, but this time it looked as if they were really done for. And most frustrating was the thought that they would never even know what happened, what freak accident had placed them in this precise place at this precise time.

While McCoy was musing over this disheartening thought, a welcome yet out-of-place sound floated tantalizingly over the pitiful human cries. McCoy cocked his head, incredulous. He fumbled in his sodden clothes until his fingers closed around his communicator, pulling it free and waving it high over his head, out of the water. "We're here, Spock! Dammit, here we are!"



Again, Spock and Scott went through the beaming process, but this time, as Scott's fingers played over the controls, he excitedly called, "I've got something, I think. It's weak, but it could be a communicator!"

This time, Spock was sure the objects forming on the pad were human. He and Scott unconsciously held their breath until their two friends were fully formed. Spock took one look at the pair and stabbed the intercom. "Medical team to the transporter room, immediately."

Kirk's face was white, pinched with pain, and a river of red ran down the back of his wet shirt. "Captain!" Scott exclaimed, already stepping forward to help McCoy support Kirk.

"I'm all right, Scotty," he mumbled, even though it was plain he was not. In no time, an anti-grav stretcher was on the scene, and Kirk was being rushed to sickbay. Spock opened the nearby emergency supplies and shook out a blanket to place around McCoy's shoulders.

"Thanks, Spock," he said wearily, moving off after the stretcher bearing Kirk.

"Doctor," Spock called after him.

McCoy turned.

"Were either of you badly injured?"

McCoy thought a moment, his wet face etched with fatigue and worry. "Jim will recover, if that's what you mean. But it's not something either one of us will forget -- ever."



Several days later, McCoy sat at his desk, nursing a 'pick-me-up' he had mixed for himself, consisting of a small portion of soda and a larger portion of whiskey. It was late, but he had no plans to retire to his cabin just yet.

Kirk's recovery was well under way, yet he felt no urge to leave him in the care of his able subordinates that night. He and Kirk were both still suffering from the traumatic experience they had shared, each in his own way.

Kirk flatly refused to discuss the matter, with himself or anyone, and McCoy wondered whether he ever would. He was letting Kirk handle it in his own way for the time being. If, or when, the captain felt like talking about it, he would make sure he was available.

McCoy had done a little private research on the tragedy, though he had no idea what had prompted him. He supposed it was out of a morbid curiosity to know what became of some of the people they had encountered.

There had been 2,201 people on board, and only 705 survivors, mostly women and children. Many of the prominent men aboard the ship had perished. Three-quarters of the crew were lost, including Captain Smith, First Officer Murdoch, and most of the other officers. Second Officer Lightoller was the senior surviving officer. None of the six piece band and their director who had bravely played on until near the end had been saved.

When McCoy had told Kirk about his research, his face had remained closed and pained, but he had asked, reluctantly it seemed, about a third class passenger named Constance Conway. McCoy had searched, but found nothing. She had evidently vanished in the mists of time.

He *had* found the account of Ben Guggenheim, whose clothing and watch he had 'borrowed'. After realizing the ship was sinking, Guggenheim went below to his cabin and exchanged his life belt and warm sweater for his evening clothes. Reappearing on deck, he declared that if he was going to die, he wanted to perish like a gentlemen.

McCoy set aside his drink, and reached for the gold watch, lifted it in his hand, its crystal now shattered and its hands permanently stopped at 2:18. "Well, I'll never know whether you missed your watch or not that night," McCoy remarked softly. "But I reckon I don't need to feel too guilty for taking it -- you wouldn't have wanted a fine piece like this to go to the bottom."

A slight noise at the doorway drew his attention. "Jim, you shouldn't be out of bed," he stated.

Kirk ignored his friend. "Mind if I sit down?"

McCoy gestured to the chair opposite his desk and reached for the whiskey bottle and a glass, then pulled back, obviously changing his mind.

Kirk saw the gesture. "I could use a little bit of that, Doctor," he requested.

The two exchanged a look. "You oughta know I don't prescribe alcohol for my recovering patients," he complained, but nevertheless he splashed a moderate amount into the glass and pushed it across the desk. "What brings you prowling around here this time of night?"

"Shouldn't you be off duty?" Kirk asked, evading the question.

"Probably. Shouldn't you be asleep?" McCoy returned.

"Probably," Kirk echoed, raising his drink with his left hand and taking a contemplative sip. "You know, Bones, if Spock hadn't figured out what was going on . . ." he trailed off.

"I know. And if we hadn't been beaming down to the precise location the Titanic was lost, on that same day, it might never have happened." McCoy studied his glass, swirling the liquid around absently. "I don't know what to say, Jim. It was an absolutely overwhelming experience . . . one of the worst of my life. The helplessness, the waste, the . . . the tragedy," he finished.

Kirk nodded, his eyes haunted. "I keep seeing their faces, the faces of those men who knew they were doomed." He sipped his drink.

The silence drew out between the two, filling the room. Then, sensing a presence, they turned their heads as one toward the door. Spock filled the doorway, having approached on cat feet as always. "Am I interrupting?"

"Join the party, Spock," McCoy quipped, drawing up another chair.

"What is the celebration in honor of?" Spock inquired, folding his long form to a seated position, and waving off McCoy's silent question in the form of the empty glass he raised.

"Our survival," Kirk replied glumly.

"Ahh, indeed." His obsidian eyes shifted between the two friends, noting the morose atmosphere prevailing in the room. "Neither of you seem to be in a celebratory frame of mind," he observed.

Kirk ignored the comment, taking a healthy swallow of his drink. McCoy grunted. "I don't think we need to point out the reason for that to anyone, even you, Spock," he shot back, making a feeble attempt to needle Spock.

"No, Doctor, I am not unaware of the tragedy of the situation," he responded. "Surely you are not blaming yourselves for surviving?"

Neither man answered, aware of how foolish it sounded, and the question hung in the air between them. "Maybe that *is* part of the problem," McCoy finally admitted aloud. "Jim, what do you think?"

Kirk chewed on his bottom lip for a moment, then replied, "I don't feel guilty for surviving, but I *do* feel guilty for not being able to change what happened. We had every opportunity to warn them, to avert the disaster, and we failed."

Spock contemplated the clutter on McCoy's desk. "Jim, this may sound trite to you and the good doctor, but has it occurred to you that some events may be so important in the time continuum, so significant, that they are virtually predestined?"

Kirk and McCoy exchanged a considering look. Spock continued, "Additionally, your presence may have had implications you will never be able to ascertain. Perhaps only one person was saved through your efforts, but perhaps that one person might otherwise have perished."

A spark of light came into Kirk's eye, the first sign of interest McCoy had seen in days. "You may have something there, Spock. And the life of one person, insignificant as it may be in the pages of history, is still one life, isn't it?"

"Precisely."

Another silence fell over the small room, this one thoughtful. A few moments later, Kirk sat up abruptly, refilling his glass and the doctor's. "You know, Spock, I think there might be a celebration after all tonight." He splashed a small amount of the amber liquid into the third empty glass and slid it toward Spock, who picked it up speculatively. "Gentlemen, a toast. To Connie."

ON AN ICE WORLD

By Michael Bubrick

For Brian James Naughton

On a world of ice
arctic chasms searing into void
purple majesty of desolate shadow
great folds gouged into the blinding white earth
kneaded by some enraged primordial force
canyons of ice . . . frozen fissures
where no light descends into the chill depths.
No life.
Not anywhere.

A corpse sprawled in the packed snow
etches its agony into the cold
as icicles flow from dead wounds.
A league beneath this tundra
in a subterranean gulag
the cankerous heart of this place beats
pumping its blood into a deep, dark quagmire
blood it has robbed its inhabitants of
through caverns I have walked
where beasts roam
howling in eternal night.

Plodding forward,
the arc of my vision is shrouded
in a frozen, bitter wind.
Gusts of ice
are ripping my eyes from their sockets
limbs heavy
I no longer feel sanguine about any of this.
My skin crinkles and drops from my bones
to crumple like cellophane in the frigid
turgid tundra.

Before me, I think I see them:
the alien exotic
and my friend, Jim.
My heart quickens
as ice and flurry
force me to retreat into the mage of the cold, cold air.
I thought Hell was supposed to be a warm place
lit by the unholy fires of the Devil.

My steps are not forthcoming
my lungs are weary
expelling their bitter sustenance
and I falter, rags flapping
in this frozen stream
which howls and rips me asunder,
sucks the blood from my veins
the tears from my parched eyes
the heat from my soul.
I have become obsolete.

"Leave me - I'm finished."
He grasps me . . . supports me.
I can't hear his voice
over the incessant banshee howling
of this godforsaken place.
And somehow I move forward
into the piercing darts of snow
my friend, Jim, at my side,
supporting me.

Our companion exotic stops ahead
an unnatural figure which seems
to totter on the edge of an infinite precipice
an ice blue abyss
which has shorn the continent
from its motherlode
millions of years ago
when it was warm.

I can still feel the tentative life within me
like quicksilver fleet;
a dim struggle to survive.
I observe myself
from a warmer place:
I am not here
there is no Rura Penthe
Gorkon is not dead -
my mind is reeling
I am a mad dervish
I do not like this cold, cold place.
There is no life here.
None.

My friend, Jim, is pulling me forward
back into this frozen fecal asteroid.
This is a dead place
for I cannot see the suns in the sky;
cannot possibly comprehend their warmth
cannot ascertain why
we plod towards this glacial edge of the world,
our faith placed in this alien peculiar
who would as soon, I am sure,
slit our throats as save our lives.

All I know
all I see
all I understand
is my friend, Jim
who guides me.
With him at my side
holding me
supporting me
I can honestly say
that I will live to see a new day.

RITE OF PASSAGE

By W. Jean Rohrer

Art by Leah Shaw

In a dimension vibrating so fast none of the third plane could perceive it, the Old Ones' network of minds touched, for the first time this century, as third plane measures time. All information was instantaneously exchanged amongst them. "It is again time to search the third plane," came one thought sign.

"Each time we enter that dimension we change the course of their lifeline, their 'history,' as they call it," offered the second thought sign, with the faintest trace of concern.

"This is the only way we have to closely examine them, to determine the level of progress of our grandchildren. It gives us the opportunity to assist them if they truly need help. And to pick up and assist the transition of those who have reached sufficient awareness of the reality of the fourth dimension." Acknowledgement of this fact was felt throughout the mind net.



"I'm sorry, Jim. It's been a wonderful relationship . . . when you're around." Genise's lovely face looked sad, her violet eyes shimmered and glistened with tears as she pushed Kirk away from the embrace. "It's just. . . you're not around much. I get so lonesome. I just can't keep this up, Jim. I want out, and I want out right now."

James T. Kirk's guts twisted in knots. He felt the cold numbness overtake him as he dropped his arms and stepped back. "Please, Genise. I'll do anything for you, you know that!" Kirk hated to plead, but he could not stop it. He'd sensed things weren't quite like they should be between them, but he'd just never had time to sort out what was wrong.

"Sure, Jim," came the sad ironic voice. "Anything but stay here with me. You're never happy planetside for more than three weeks. How could you stay with me forever? You'd hate me and yourself. And you know I can never serve aboard ship due to severe space sickness. No," the raven black hair slid back and forth across lovely shoulders as Captain Genise Delusio of Starfleet's Judge Advocate's Office shook her head. "It's over, Jim. I've found someone who loves me and who will spend time with me — live with me — be here for me. Someone I can be WITH." A wry look twisted the beautiful face. "I need that," she admitted, quietly.

Uncharacteristic rage twisted the clean features as blood surged into the open face and neck and jealousy distorted Kirk's perception and usually sensitive demeanor. Ego battled common sense and temporarily won. "Who is he?! Who's been seeing MY woman?" He advanced toward her, fists clenched, face ugly. "Did you go out looking for a 'friend'?" The voice was sharply painful, sarcastic. "He started out a friend who just wanted to help 'console' you, right?" Kirk knew he was right. It's what he would have done himself in those circumstances.

Among Captain Delusio's character traits, one which had captivated James Kirk was her absolute lack of fear. Another was her plain speaking straightforwardness. She did not pull punches. Logical almost to the level of Vulcans, she pursued ideas with singlemindedness. None of these qualities disguised her femininity; blatant, unfeigned and innately sophisticated. She was always herself, and she knew exactly who and what that was.

Now she faced a man she loved still; a man with whom she had shared a contract cooperation for almost four years. It sounded like a long time, but the actual time she got to spend with Jim Kirk was so limited. It was like being married for a year, maybe two, to a long-distance traveling salesman. He was always on the road to the stars; always helping someone in the Federation cause.

Genise had known from the beginning she would never have Jim totally. His ship and crew were the bases of his life. But he could be so damned persuasive — and charming and loving. Her thoughts returned to the present — to the angry, hurt man in front of her.

Without raising her voice or moving away from his threatening advance, Delusio said, "Jim, don't do this — to either one of us. If you're asking me have I slept with Jerry, the answer is 'no,' though it's hardly your business. The contract did not state exclusivity as one of its clauses. You wanted it that way, remember?" She raised her hand to forestall the impending response. "I have always been honest with you. I would not and could not change now. Tomorrow, Jerry and I will sign a lifetime marriage contract. And next week you and the Enterprise will set off against for another mission to wherever. Until your next leave, you will forget I exist. You will find someone else, Jim, someone who can accept the time limitations. I wish you well." Turning her back, she walked out the door and out of James Kirk's life.

She walked out! She actually walked out on me! Pain pushed the tears into hazel eyes, but he would not, perhaps could not, allow himself that release. In an effort to control the searing pain, something deep inside, just at the edge of Kirk's awareness, something that had been soft and warm and tender, closed up. Then his mind buried the idea. He would survive. He emptied the brandy bottle in the room and then headed for the nearest strip of bars. Several days later, a thoroughly anesthetized Kirk returned to the Enterprise, just able to navigate without assistance as he made his way out of the transporter room, lurched into the turbolift, stumbled into his cabin and fell unconscious in his bunk.



McCoy's eyebrow arched in a maneuver rivaling that of his Vulcan companion as they arrived at the transporter room in time to see the not-quite-steady progress of their captain down the corridor away from them, making fair haste for the nearest lift. *At least Jim picked an off-hour to beam up, so he's not on display for the crew*, the doctor thought. *Bet he wanted to miss both of us, too.* A frown deepened the lines in the craggy features. *He hasn't been this drunk on leave since he married Genise. . . I wonder what happened?* Noting Spock's mouth open to speak to Jim, McCoy laid a gentle, restraining hand on the thin arm. "Not now, Spock. Something tells me a lot happened down there and

he doesn't want to talk about it right now. Matter of fact, I'd bet we're the last folks he wants around right now."

"He did appear less than eager to speak with me earlier." McCoy's questioning face encouraged the Vulcan to continue. *Now maybe Spock'll tell me why he called me to join him in the transporter room*, the surprised physician thought to himself.

"As is usual, I advised the captain I would meet him in the transporter room," Spock continued. This ritual had become a habit when Spock was left as senior officer aboard. "Jim was most adamant I should remain on the bridge or doing whatever I had been doing. In fact, I had been meditating. Lt. Rogers notified me when the captain signaled to beam up." Had he been human, the Vulcan would have sighed. Not allowed that slightest release, the eyebrow had to serve double duty. "He does not appear able to discuss anything at present." McCoy blinked and double-checked Spock's face, wondering if he had just heard sarcasm from the so-called emotionless wonder. The eyebrow quirked humorously, but the facial maneuver did not relieve the underlying worry.



The hangover, along with the accompanying pounding headache, was almost worth it. It prevented him from thinking about anything not immediately related to his duty, and his responsibilities. Not even hungover, did James Kirk ever forget his responsibilities as captain of Starfleet's flagship. It was a mantle he had willingly donned. Rarely was he able to ease out from under its weight. Now that very weight filled him with relief. It gave him a focus and purpose, kept him moving forward, at least for now.

Few sensed a change in the tenor or degree of Kirk's relief at being back aboard. The Enterprise was home, and family and his — wife, lover. The last thoughts diminished the relief, dimming the broad smile. But command control overrode all feelings. He would control! The relationship could not have endured much longer anyway. Better it was over. He did not have time for outside feelings, outside attachments that might divide his attention and endanger his ship or his crew.

The faint tinge of familiar eagerness touched him as he impatiently waited for the turbolift to deposit him on the bridge. Kirk looked around quickly, noting the personnel busy with preflight checks, and settled himself into the command chair just vacated by Commander Sulu. A yeoman handed him the undocking and mission information. He smiled at her, noting more carefully than usual, the graceful, blonde beauty. Sighing quietly to himself, he jerked his thoughts back to work.

"Signal spacedock we're ready for undocking, Mr. Sulu."

"Aye, sir," came the eager, smiling response. "And welcome back, Captain."

"Thank you, Mr. Sulu." Kirk glanced around the bridge at the familiar faces and smiled. "I hope all your leaves were pleasant." The hesitation on the word was minuscule, but did not pass unnoticed by the unusually sensitive ears ever attuned to their leader.

As the helmsman concentrated on their departure maneuvers, Kirk read their new mission orders and groaned inside.

"USS Enterprise, NCC 1701, Captain James T. Kirk, commanding: You are hereby ordered to Section 18347 for patrol and mapping/survey of reported expansion of Aquarian Nebula. Reports of ship

engine failures and radiation damage at close range. Specifics attached this communique. Proceed your discretion. Signed, J.T. Harrison, Admiral, Starfleet Command." Patrol duty; boring, uneventful patrol duty in a secure area of the galaxy. You'd think after Vger, and all the other crises we've handled, they'd at least let us have a reasonably interesting mission! Kirk hoped for some excitement, something to get his teeth into and . . . *And what, James T.? Kill someone to work off your frustrations? Play dangerous games, maybe get yourself killed? What good would either of those do? Level off and fly straight.* Bringing himself back to duty, he ordered, "Begin undocking, Mr. Sulu. Then set course 257 Mark 4."

"Aye, sir."

"Course laid in, Keptin."

"Take us out, Mr. Sulu." The helmsman nodded acknowledgement, then became completely absorbed as he maneuvered the huge ship out of Spacedock.



"Chess, Captain?" Spock offered as the turbolift took them to their quarters after shift. He calmly surveyed his friend and captain, noting the tiniest of signs of something different; unable to distinguish what at present.

"Sure, Spock," came the smiling rejoinder. "I think I can manage to acquit myself with dignity. I might even beat the pants off you!" He smirked at the thought of demolishing his friend's carefully laid maneuvers. "I'll see you after dinner."

Kirk was warmed by the Vulcan's offer of a game, recognizing it as Spock's way of initiating contact, of finding out what was going on with his friend and captain. The friendship which had developed with Spock was one of his life's stable forces; an underpinning on which Kirk depended, perhaps more than he should.

Spock, and McCoy, of course, were the only two beings on board who ever knew his inner feelings; knew the stresses to which he was subjected as part and parcel of command. But the break-up with Genise was not something he could discuss in detail, even with Bones. I don't want to talk about it, and Bones will grill me, telling me how therapeuTic it is to talk about traumatic incidents! He'd have to come up with some explanation, however, as his financial arrangements and will would have to change. But there would be no suggestions or discussion. The relationship was done, that chapter of his life permanently closed. Finished.



Although there was nothing substantial on which either McCoy could pin his feelings, or Spock his theories based on observations, both realized something subtle had changed with Kirk. He was outwardly still the affable, capable captain, who worried about his crew. He still demonstrated his command abilities. But in some sense Jim Kirk was no longer 'connected.'

"It's like he's playing a role, Spock, going through the motions, pretending. He's very good at it. He's had lots of practice." McCoy's bright blue eyes were shadowed by concern for his friend.

"Doctor, I cannot believe the captain is 'play-acting,' as you call it. He talks during our games and our shared meals as he always has, yet there seems a different . . . quality I am unable to isolate and examine." The Vulcan's angular face was solemn, with dark shadow chasms in the dimmed lights within McCoy's cabin.

"A difference in the degree of sharing, maybe?" McCoy sensed Spock's hesitation at mentioning feelings. "He says all the right things, but the laughter doesn't reach his eyes, and neither does the anger." The physician watched Spock carefully, almost able to see the analysis.

Spock nodded slowly. He was more disturbed by Kirk's behavior changes than he wishes the ever-observant doctor to know. "The degree — the level — of emotion accompanying verbalization is changed, quite markedly. The captain's usual dynamic drive and motivation appears weakened."

"I don't know for sure what-all happened on leave. The only thing Jim will say is his contract with Genise Delusio is over — at her request. I've tried everything I can think of to get him to talk about it. He dances around the subject, but stops before touching anything meaningful or important. He's erected a forcefield around it, trying to block the pain. Whatever it is, it's not healthy. The change in his body language is another symptom." McCoy paused for a deep breath. "But until he either volunteers to talk, or asks for help — or demonstrates lack of competence — there's nothing we can do but keep supporting him."

Watching Spock process this information, McCoy was seized by an idea. Jim Kirk was a toucher. He reached out and touched Spock periodically, as a means of bridging the sometimes uncomfortable gap between Vulcan standards and Human feelings. Given the change in Jim's kinetics, his near total withdrawal in body language, the good doctor realized part of what bothered the first officer. He reached out and laid a friendly hand on Spock's shoulder. "Give him time, Spock. He'll come through this." He squeezed the thin shoulder as the Vulcan roused himself.

"I look forward to his recovery, Doctor," came the deep voice as Spock moved into the corridor.



Despite his best efforts, Kirk found himself with time alone, and threw himself into the chair. He was physically exhausted, but not quite ready for sleep. For weeks now, ever since. . . ever since their last leave, he had carefully engineered being among other people, resisting the impulse to stay alone in his cabin and drink, or even more frightening, think. He had efficiently cleared up all his routine and usually-ignored paperwork that kept a starship supplied, crewed, and maintained. Kirk knew the latter had raised warning flags, incurring Spock's lifted eyebrow, and closer than usual scrutiny from the dark eyes.

This 'evening,' Kirk had worked out in the gym 'til he was so tired he could barely stagger back to his quarters, hoping to fall into an exhausted, dreamless sleep. He had convinced Spock to increase the level of their workouts, which the Vulcan had done with some trepidation. Now the captain would see how well the physical exhaustion allayed his nightmares.



With the passage of time, and little else to distract their attention, the crew began to notice something wrong. The supportive, capable, joking captain who made miracles happen became focused on their mistakes, their deficiencies. He started demanding more and more effort, greater efficiency at

weapons, tighter course plotting, more speed, greater engine efficiency, more maneuverability and quicker repair time. No department and no one, not even Spock, was immune to the demands, or to the scathing sarcasm. Enterprise was no longer a happy ship.



Stretching slightly, Captain James T. Kirk carefully closed the book on its gilt bookmark. It was the newest prize in his collection, discovered in a back-alley shop in San Francisco on that disastrous leave months before. *Admiral Hornblower* in a genuine leather binding, complete with a faint, musty odor. It had laid on his bookshelf until now, still in its neat wrapping. For months he had been unable to touch anything from that time period: mementos, purchases, holopix. Items originally purchased for Genise he had simply thrown into the nearest disposal chute, along with her pictures and other reminders he had kept in his cabin. Tonight's decision to involve himself with Hornblower was because he needed distraction. The choices were read or think. No contest. The agile mind dove into the novel and for hours experienced a different, and more pleasant, reality.

Kirk sighed, stretched again, and indulged his imagination just a moment more; envying the life of those early sailors with their tall ships and massive sails. That was truly the life! Adventure, hardship and the true test of a man — his own abilities against the forces of nature. Kirk's thoughts drew to more current times and he wondered if command was becoming stale, or if he was becoming stale in command.



Their vibrational rate slowed, and the Old Ones manifested into third dimension existence. The very process of their 'arrival' in this dimension altered the universe surrounding the event, increasing its vibrational rate. Loosely associated, these formless energy beings were virtually invisible, though like the less highly developed Organians, they could adopt or adapt any form at all, in several planes.

"How far do you suppose our grandchildren have progressed by now?" came a thought form. "It has been so long by their time reckoning."

"At the time of our last visit, there was small-scale fighting all over Sol III, what they refer to as 'Earth.' There was much racially- or tribally-motivated hatred, so much division. . . so little understanding." The thought bore traces of great sadness. "We can only hope progress has occurred."

Another essence commented, "the Canopian colonies were developing nicely at that time. They had already mastered space travel and matter transmission." Each essence added its report on the beings or areas of the universes it had visited.

A wistful comment infringed on the subsequent silence. "Do you suppose there are any beings ready for the next dimension yet?"

"You are impatient again, brother," came the initial thought sign again.



Enterprise's new assignment was unlimited in terms of time. It included the vast Sigma tri Gamma system and the only minimally charted and explored nebula. From a scientific standpoint, the mission would be 'fascinating.' To James T. Kirk, it was a blueprint for terminal boredom. The crew was fit and ready. During that last two-week shore leave most of the crew had raised hell and worked

off the energies and stresses which build during enforced confinement, albeit in a very large ship. After that fiasco with Genise. . . His mind moved abruptly away from the subject. Even after Kirk had raised a fair amount of hell, drunk himself almost stuporous, and gotten into several unreported fights, deep inside he had a flat, unrelenting and horribly empty feeling of sameness; like he'd done it all before.

Am I getting old, he wondered. *"I've been everywhere and done 'most everything. What's left? Maybe a tour around the ship will put me back into shape. There's nothing like the Enterprise*, he thought. Never one for long soul-searching episodes on the conscious level, Captain James Tiberius Kirk pulled on the accoutrements of command and went to inspect his ship.

The bridge on this off shift was quietly alert and in the hands of Lt. Chekov, who rapidly apprised his Captain of their position and course. "It's wery quiet, Keptin." Kirk noted the worried crease in the young man's forehead. He stopped to chat a few minutes, attempting to put these 'youngsters' more at ease. *They get younger every day*, he thought to himself. Then he continued his tour, finally ending up at sickbay.

For once, McCoy was nowhere to be found. Nurse Janus informed him, "Dr. McCoy's gone to his quarters, Captain. He muttered something about pursuing some chemical research. May I help you with something?"

"No. . . no. I just had an idea I wanted to discuss with him. It'll wait." Thanking her and offering one of his more charming smiles, Kirk aimed his prow toward the Chief Medical Officer's quarters. McCoy was known to be a night owl and late riser when conditions permitted, so he could still be up. Without really being aware of it, Kirk's brow began to furrow. *It's not like Bones to be away from either sickbay or his research labs most of his waking time*, he thought. And what kind of chemical research would he — or could he — be doing in his cabin? He rang the door chime and was met with a faintly slurred comment he interpreted as "Come" or some variant. As the door slid open, the smell of ethanol was overpowering. Chemical research indeed! Kirk chuckled to himself. "Bones, am I interrupting anything — like a bath in bourbon?"

"Come on in, Jim-boy! I'm concocting a potion from a recipe I got on leave. It's supposed to be the smoothest, best kicker in all of Human space. Here, try some." McCoy handed Kirk a glass of multicolored pinks, mauves and golds in layers, who sniffed cautiously. The liquid was most pleasing to the eye and had a spicy, sweet fragrance. He swallowed a fair-sized gulp only to discover someone had set fire to his chest and kicked him hard in the gut. Choking and wheezing, he finally managed to gasp, "My God, Bones! What's in that stuff besides antimatter and mules?!"

McCoy had a bland, self-satisfied look on his face. "Now that's not a bad combination at all," he drawled with a wide grin. "It'll never replace the mint julep, of course. . . ." He set his glass down and sobered as he looked at the younger man. "But what brings you here, Jim? I haven't seen much of you lately." Bright blue eyes observed the young commander carefully.

Kirk finished coughing and caught his breath. "Yeah, I know, Bones. I was just reading *Admiral Hornblower*. Fascinating the life of those old wet-sea sailors!" A faint, wistful smile touched the open face.

"So what're you doing here? Did you finish it? It's not like you to break off in the middle of a good book unless duty calls."

Kirk was almost sorry he had come here. Now he had to answer McCoy's questions, and the man was an astute interrogator. But he was also a good friend. Kirk shook his head. "I just took a break, Bones. I got to thinking how much more alive people were then, how much more exciting and real life was and . . .

McCoy's eyebrows rose at this. ". . . and you're just a poor starship captain with responsibility for 450 crewpeople, commanding the flagship and most famed cruiser in Federation history and it's not exciting?" Sarcasm laced with disbelief showed in the rough voice.

"I'm feeling. . . maybe bored isn't the right term, but like I've done it all before. It's all the same." Something in the tone of Kirk's voice drew McCoy's full attention. He frowned.

"I'm not surprised, Jim. Before Genise, your life had become routine. You took shore leave only when I threatened you, then made a contest with yourself to see how much you could drink, how many women would succumb to your charms, and how much danger you could get yourself into!" McCoy stared hard at Kirk, knowing the young man would not appreciate his next comment; knowing it had to be said. "You were better. . . with Genise. You were more focused, happier. You seemed more in control, more balanced. Now you're back to your old habits." He raised a hand to forestall the impending angry rebuttal. "It's like you're testing yourself all the time, Jim, and now you're pushing your crew, too.

"And yes, I know about the drunken brawls you got into, and your attempt to single-handedly create a shortage of Saurian brandy in San Francisco!" Kirk felt the blood flush up his neck and into his face. He had made a first-class ass of himself, undoubtedly.

McCoy ran his ever-present scanner over his friend, brows knit with worry. "There's nothing medically wrong with you, Jim, but I have to ask you — what are you trying to prove? What are you looking for?"

"Maybe just yesterday." Kirk laughed, shrugged and determined to belay further discussion on the subject. "Did you pack in a supply of your favorite libation? he asked with a wide grin.

But McCoy was not to be distracted from the topic. "I did, but I'm not sure you need any at this point. You're a starship captain, Jim, and the best. You're the standard against which we're matched. But you're also a human bein', with all the same needs, wants, desires. . . and hurts . . . as the rest of us poor mortals!" The craggy face showed compassion, as the physician continued, "And there is nothing in all the worlds wrong with admitting that fact," he said softly. Concerned darkened the blue eyes scrutinizing the younger man.

"Enough, already, Bones!" Kirk poured himself a glass of his favorite Saurian brandy. His back was partly turned to McCoy, and in a voice almost too quiet to be heard, he muttered, "But what if what I am isn't enough?"

McCoy looked up, startled, then wrestled with his face muscles not to reveal the shock and concern he felt for his friend and captain. He reached out and touched Kirk's arm gently. "Jim. . . and then ran out of words. Kirk tossed back his drink, looked at the doctor's hand on his arm and moved away.

"It's nothing, Bones. We're on a milk-run and milk-runs always make me introspective." Flashing what he hoped was his usual devil-may-care smirk at McCoy, Kirk moved out into the corridor and headed for his quarters.



Kirk awakened in his cabin. "Time," he asked the computer.

"0330 and 22 seconds," replied the mechanical voice, as the lights came on.

His eyes were screwed tightly shut against the light as he grumbled, "douse the lights." The computer complied and Kirk was immediately sound asleep.

He is standing on a hillside overlooking a vast expanse of greens and golds. Grains ripening, he thinks. As he is enjoying the scene, he becomes aware of a presence beside him. Turning, he finds a softer, gentler being with his own face, flashing one of his own little-boy smiles. As Kirk starts to ask who this person is, he senses someone behind him. He turns again to find another replica of himself in a very aggressive posture, the smile of a wolf on his face. Kirk drops instinctively into a fighting crouch; the hair at the nape of his neck rising. Before the battle can be joined, yet a third figure appears — a beautiful woman, charming and intelligent. "Who are you? Jim asks.

"Why, I'm you of course." He looks at the other figures and each nods agreement, then each turns and moves off in opposite directions toward the others.

"Wait!" Kirk sat up in bed with the lights on full in response to his shout. He had the distinct feeling of being pulled apart.

James Kirk's dreams rarely disturbed him. In fact, he almost never remembered them on awakening. Now he sat on the side of his bed, with the scenes from his dream vivid; their meaning, if any, remained obscure. He ran a hand through disheveled hair. He considered himself a reasonably well-adjusted and integrated being — and Starfleet must agree, or he would not be in command of their flagship — or any other vessel.

"I don't want to fight anyone," Kirk mused aloud. "I'm not an aggressor. I fight only when I can't avoid it." *Unless some bastard insults you or your ship!* offered part of his mind. *Or steals your woman!* came the unexpected and unwelcome comment from another part of his mind. "And I'm certainly not a woman! How did she get into this picture?" he mumbled to himself. *Starship Captains have a special image to maintain,* he thought. It's like the professional persona of a doctor or a scientist. And being a starship captain means you are smart, tough, fast and capable. There is not time to be a wimp or a weakling. You don't lose. . . you can't. Too many lives are at stake. The rebellious faction of his mind added, *And so is your reputation as top commander, hot shot!*

He had always wanted to command a starship. It was the most important part of his life, his very being. He would allow nothing to interfere with or endanger that — nothing! Maybe that's why the dream is so disturbing, he mused, but where is the threat? It just doesn't make sense. Surprised by his own reactions, he forced the dream and related thoughts to the back burner of his mind and headed for the fresher.

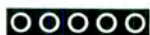


Spock shifted his position slightly as he knelt on the meditation stone. The hot, dim redness of his cabin swirled around him, thick with the Vulcan incense which enhanced his meditations and lit only by the flames of the firepot. Such a break in form was indicative of the Vulcan's state of disquiet at present. Despite several attempts, he found himself unable to focus on either the mathematical or the experiencing modes which provided his deepest meditative states.

Spock's mind suddenly shifts to a severe desert scene. He recognizes Mt. Seleya in the background; the desert below him is brightly lit by T'Khut. As he calmly observes this scene, a figure appears nearby — a human form with Spock's own face, smiling greetings to him. Raising his hand in the ta'al of greeting, Spock senses another presence and turns to find a granite-visaged Vulcan with his own face yet again. "Live long and prosper," Spock offers the traditional greeting to both Human and Vulcan. "How may I be of service to you?"

The Vulcan image replies, "We may be of service to you." The vision faded and Spock found himself staring into the dying embers of the firepot. "Fascinating!" he murmured as he arose and prepared for duty.

"Wait!" The command-cry rang out in Spock's mind, bringing him to instant awareness. Jim! He touched the telepathic link which had formed spontaneously between them, reaching for Kirk with his mind, finding the Human undamaged but greatly disturbed. The yell had not been intended for Spock. Indeed, the Human did not realize Spock had 'heard' him. In his current frame of mind, Spock knew his captain would be highly embarrassed. But it is characteristic of Vulcan telepathy that prolonged periods of close proximity between two who have mind-melded reduces the level of natural mind barriers between them and enhances spontaneous contact. Intense concentration masked the Vulcan features as Spock sought a means of discovering what bothered his friend and captain.



As usual, Spock was already on the bridge when Kirk arrived. *Doesn't he ever sleep*, the captain wondered to himself. *How I envy him that calm exterior and the means to examine and deal with his problems internally. Or do Vulcans have problems?*

Spock looked at his captain with closer than usual scrutiny. He had learned to lightly scan this human, without invading Kirk's privacy, to augment his visual impressions and enhance his understanding of the nuances of human voice and body stance. Kirk was firmly in control of his facial muscles this morning; his voice was mild, his body-language saying — what? Just the faintest of ripples in the everything's-wonderful-and-I'm-in-command facade. But there was an underlying fatigue, a few extra wrinkles at the eyes that proclaimed Captain Kirk had not slept well.

"Report, Mr. Spock."

"On course for the Sigma tri Gamma sector, Captain. All systems functioning normally. Our present course will bring us within long range sensor range of the outer edges of the Aquarian Nebula. If we have no other orders, this would be a good opportunity to run spectrographic studies as well as tests of rapid fluctuations in gravity."

"Very well, Mr. Spock. Since we're on a 'Captain's discretion' patrol, you might as well find something interesting to do." A raised eyebrow was the only response. Once again Kirk found himself



amazed, and in all truth envious, of the Vulcan's ability to engross himself with single-mindedness in a topic. *Maybe I need to develop new interests*, he thought. He became aware of Spock talking to him.

"... so a close-in scan from 100,000 kilometers would provide much valuable new data on radiation effects, and should be sufficiently distant to avoid the engine failures reported by the Kaiwa and the Tran'chu."

"Oh, yes, Spock," he replied with the faintest of irritation in his voice. "Requisition whatever equipment and personnel you need."

"Yes, Captain." The fathomless black eyes bored in on Kirk. Very softly, Spock asked, "Jim, are you all right?"

"I'm fine, Spock. . . ." Kirk's response was overridden with a muffled stage whisper from McCoy.

"Bull! If you believe that, there's a nice bridge in Brooklyn just waiting for you to buy it. . . ." Arriving on the bridge, and hearing both Spock's concerned question and Kirk's less-than-honest answer, the physician had moved almost between the two friends to deliver his sarcastic rebuttal. . .

"Indeed, Doctor." The Vulcan's voice could have dried martinis.

"Bones!" Kirk exploded, drawing a few startled glances from the crew. "There is nothing the matter with me, and the bridge is not the place to discuss it if there were!" fumed Kirk in a whisper, as the bridge personnel attempted to ignore the heated conversation.

"Not getting enough sleep! For who knows what reasons! What're you trying to do to yourself? And why? Whatever it is, I intend to find out!" McCoy hissed, remembering to keep his voice down.

"Doctor McCoy," rumbled the Vulcan's deep voice, "I must agree with the Captain this is neither the time nor the place for this discussion. I suggest you desist and find some potion to brew in sickbay." The faintest of gleams in the dark eyes did little to relieve the stark command of Spock's words.

Outgunned and knowing he could be physically removed from the bridge, McCoy gave in. "Captain, I expect to see you in sickbay at the end of this shift. That's a medical order!" He fired his parting shot, somewhat louder than he had intended.

"Oh, all right, Bones! Anything to get you two old ladies off my neck!"

A dark eyebrow slid under perfect bangs at the allusion, but Spock said nothing.

As McCoy stomped toward the lift and Kirk and Spock turned back to their duties, Lieutenant Commander Uhura stopped the doctor.

"Doctor McCoy," she whispered. "I . . . don't know quite how to say this." She stopped and looked quickly around the bridge.

"Why don't you stop in my office later, Uhura. We can talk privately there."

"Thanks, Leonard," she said and flashed him a stunning smile of relief.



The shift seemed interminable to Kirk. He had done some of the seemingly endless administrative work, and his level of boredom was nearly bone deep.

"Captain," came Uhura's pleasant voice, "I'm picking up a transmission from Starfleet Command."

"On screen, Uhura." The face of Admiral José Mendez formed on the main viewscreen.

"Good morning, Jim."

"Admiral, it's good to see you again. Does this mean you have something for us to do?" Kirk's eagerness was not even faintly veiled.

Mendez chuckled. "Jim, you never could accept what's going on right now. Always looking for that adventure ahead in the next galaxy." The older man's face sobered as he continued. "This may or may not be an adventure, but you've got it."

"We've lost contact with the planet Shanti, in the Gamma Rho system," continued Mendez. "Our transmissions from them were normal until two Standard days ago, when their signal was cut off. Prior to the cessation of transmission, the planetary coordinator, Nikhil Bramacharya, sounded like he was drugged. He had a dreamy look; he smiled continuously and kept talking about prema and Shanti. We've tried contacting them again, but we're getting no response on any frequency. Enterprise is as close as any ship and you're more restless than most captains. Use your discretion, Jim, and keep us advised. Mendez out."

"Love," murmured Uhura. "Love and peace."

"What, Commander?" Kirk looked at his communications officer with some astonishment.

"Prema and shanti, Captain. They're from an ancient Earth language called Sanskrit. Prema is love and shanti is peace, sir."

"Thank you, Ms. Uhura." Kirk smiled at her as he marveled to himself at the many talents Uhura and others of his crew demonstrated. He swiveled his command console around to face the science station. "Mr. Spock, what do we know about Shanti?"

"I am accessing that information right now, Captain. On screen, please, Commander." Spock indicated Uhura with a nod. The screen filled with scenes of a semi-arid planet, with dense population, some impressive forests and vast farming installations.

"A Class M world, Captain, settled in the late 21st Century by Earth's United Indian Federation. After years of religious strife, this Federation was able to bring all factions and sects together to seek relief from their burgeoning populations and devastating poverty. They designed, built, equipped and launched the colony ships totally without aid from the other nationstates. The colonists represented all levels of caste, every sect, cult and religious belief, and they named their planet 'Shanti,' the Sanskrit word for peace, as a demonstration of their commitment to peace. There have been no wars or recorded sectarian strife since the original planetfall. As Ms. Uhura has stated, Captain, the term 'prema' is Sanskrit for 'love.'"

"Hmmm." Kirk thought about that information. "You mentioned caste, Spock. Do you mean they still practice that as a form of racism or slavery?"

"No, sir. The original idea of caste is ancient; drawn from the earliest of Earth's recorded religious texts, the Rg Veda. Supposedly Deity created all beings, each caste to perform a particular type of function in that lifetime. If I understand the context, the belief system included a reincarnation of the essence or soul, and the progression to higher or lower caste in following lives, based on one's behavior in the present life and one's karma, or accumulated good or bad effects from the current and past lives. Each life was an opportunity to grow, to rid one's self of evil or base tendencies. The aim was subsequent enlightenment and merging with Brahman or Godhead. Unfortunately, as is frequently true with Human customs, the letter of the law was carried out more zealously than the spirit, and the caste system became an institutionalized form of slavery."

"Yes, well, we humans are not known for our logic, or for our straightforward development, but we do get there, and that's the important point!" Immediately, Kirk realized he had just reacted defensively to what had been a logical and totally unaccusatory description of the facts. Spock's eyebrows headed for his bangs, concern deep within the dark eyes. In an effort to avoid squirming under that unrelenting gaze, Kirk said, "How long til we reach Shanti, Mr. Sulu?"

"Eight days, sir, at Warp 6."

"Very well. Set course for Shanti, Mr. Mahoney. Ahead Warp factor 6."



McCoy ran numerous tests, passing a whole battery of assorted scanners and probes over Kirk, all the while flapping much like a frightened fowl.

"I told you I was fine, Bones. You and Spock just fret like a pair of old ladies! A man can't even be thoughtful without both of you jumping on him."

The physician shook his head. "I'm not buying that, Jim. I've been your doctor and your friend for a lot of years. I've seen you exhausted, elated, and mortally wounded. Not even delirious or under compulsion from other beings have I seen you react this way. You're edgy, jittery, miserable, defensive, and cold as a Vulcan in the dead of winter. And most of all, you're starting to act unsure of yourself. That's not the person I know! The machines say you're fine. I know better! I'll stake my personal knowledge against this damned hardware any day!"

Kirk's voice was quiet, icy, with a sharp, cutting edge. "Doctor McCoy, I've submitted to your various tests because I thought it would shut you and Spock both up. Now enough! Just give me something — a pill or something — so I can sleep. Nothing heavy. I need to be able to respond fast."

McCoy looked hard at his captain, then went to get the medication. He knew that look on Kirk's face only too well. The 'keep out' sign was posted, and he had no verifiable reason to keep after Jim, only a gut feeling. *At least I tried*, he thought as he injected Kirk. "Now go get some rest."

McCoy's opportunity to worry about his prime patient had to wait, as the lovely communications officer glided into his office with her usual lithe grace. McCoy brightened perceptibly. "How's one of my favorite people today, Uhura?" he asked.

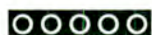
Uhura flashed him one of her dazzling smiles, then grew serious. "I'm doing well, Doctor, but I'm afraid I can't say the same for our 'Fearless Leader'."

"What bothers you about Jim, Nyota?" McCoy slipped back into his old country doctor persona. It put folks at ease and they could talk more comfortably.

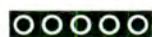
"Maybe it's just woman's intuition, but something is really bothering the Captain. Even at times of Red Alert, and when he's dog-tired, he always has a quick word or joke for me and for the rest of the bridge crew. Sometimes it's a smile of acknowledgement or a touch on the shoulder — something that makes us feel appreciated. It's like . . . he's keeping in touch with us that way." The frown on her lovely features accentuated the concern in the dark eyes. "Well, since this last leave, he hasn't done any of those things. Sometimes he acts . . . almost cold . . . like we're all strangers. He hasn't taken part in our recreation activities in weeks. He just works out with Spock like it's a life and death struggle, and keeps pounding on those training bags like he's trying to kill someone. He's not even responding normally to Spock. I'm worried, Len. How can I help?"

McCoy's thoughts sifted Uhura's comments, the craggy face lined with worry. He's probably trying to kill Genise! Or maybe just his feelings for her and his pain. Harb Tanzer had reported Kirk's activities to McCoy, since recreation fell under Medicine's aegis, noting with concern the angry, frustrated flurry of solitary (except for the workouts with Spock) activity which now accompanied each of the captain's visits to the rec facilities. Uhura's perceptions fit with other reports. The physician's mental processing caught up with the final question, and McCoy chuckled wryly as a thought crossed his mind, then said, "Aside from my initial chauvinistic response, Nyota, you may be able to help Jim by talking with him, by getting him to talk. You know he finds you attractive, and he has mentioned interest in your music and your Bantu warrior forebears. Perhaps this'll give you a handle to start a conversation — or something."

"Shame on you, Leonard! But it certainly can't hurt to try." *And besides*, Uhura thought to herself, *Jim Kirk is a 'fascinating' person!*



Kirk made it to his cabin and set the privacy lock. He thought of locking the door of the chessroom connecting his cabin with Spock's, but decided it wasn't necessary. Tonight, he had no interest in the game, even if it was his move. It would wait til tomorrow. Yawning, he fell into bed and was asleep instantly.



Their chess match was nearing endgame. Kirk had played brilliantly, challenging Spock at every move. He had figured out all the angles. Spock would be checkmated in two moves. The human had enthusiastically ragged his friend, gloating in advance. Spock was surprised and disquieted, therefore, when he checked Kirk's response to his last move and found the game undisturbed. With the slightest twinge of guilt for thinking about even such a light, non-intrusive link touch, Spock's mind brushed against his friend's. The captain slept, but without rest. He was actively fighting something or someone. The Vulcan withdrew from the link lest he compromise Kirk's privacy. He wondered how to approach his friend.



And on the hill overlooking the vast sea of grain, the four meet again. "What do you want with me?" Kirk asks.

The alpha responds. "To have you see and understand us. You want to fight me. Why?" Suddenly Kirk and the alpha replica are alone in an arena.

"I don't want to fight you or anyone else! I want to know what the hell's going on!"

"But you do want to fight me," responds the duplicate. "Your instinct when I first appeared was to adopt a fighting stance. Is it because I arouse your 'wolf,' your killer nature?"

"I am your maleness — that within you that wants to conquer and rape and pillage. I am that which wants to fight, to beat on our chest and shout our victory cries! So fight and I'll show you who you are!"

With that, the replica punches savagely at Kirk, simultaneously kneeling him. Able to dodge the first blow but not the latter, Kirk slumps to the ground in fetal position, gagging with pain and angrier than he can ever remember. He rises slowly, begins to circle in a crouch, seeking a good throw. He catches an arm and the image flies, landing with a satisfying thud, immediately rising with a grin.

"What are you?" Kirk pants.

"I'm you, James Kirk. I know every move you know, and I'll beat you every time." The image again catches Kirk at a feint and the blow doubles him over. Grimly determined, driven by rage, Kirk struggles back to his feet, managing to bring down the image in a tackle, working for a wrestling hold. His half-Nelson lasts about 30 seconds before the image manages to flip Kirk over, securing a throttling grip. Vision fading into red-spotted blackness with suffocation, Kirk wonders. How long can I keep this up? The image doesn't seem to tire.

The replica responds as though Kirk had spoken aloud. "This will continue until you die or are able to reconcile us all as you." The dream faded.

When Kirk awoke, he felt exhausted. He ached, as though he had taken a beating. His throat hurt viciously and his breathing was labored. He was angry and wanted to hurt something or someone badly. He hadn't been physically beaten since he was a kid and his older, heavier sibling pounded him. I feel like I actually fought someone! he thought, as his fingers explored various sore spots on his anatomy. No amount of pounding in the fresher removed the aches or the faint dark circles under his eyes. He winced as he bent over to pull on his boots.

"How can a dream impact physically on reality?" Kirk wondered aloud. His first thought was to discuss the matter with McCoy, but the probability of another lecture and an endless barrage of tests quickly dispelled the notion. Besides, he thought, I can't put my finger on anything specific. There's no reason to be upset by a dream. Dreams can't hurt you! That realistic and unwanted part of his mind asserted itself. If dreams can't hurt you James T, how come you look and feel like dinner for a hungry le matya? Scowling, but without a plausible comeback, he headed for the mess hall and a much-needed breakfast.



Just my luck, Kirk thought as the turbolift to the bridge arrived with Spock already aboard.

The first officer treated him to a courteous "Good morning, Captain," followed by full, unblinking Vulcan scrutiny. Spock never missed much. After a period of some silence, he asked. "Are you well, Captain?"

Kirk had been studiously avoiding that gaze, never an easy task. He heard the change in the tone of Spock's voice, and looking up quickly, caught the flicker of concern on the chiseled features. "I'm fine, Spock," he said, too fast to be convincing. "I think all this new paperwork the Admiralty is throwing at us is causing indigestion and nightmares." The eyebrow rose. The unwavering star was unnerving. *He's too polite to tell me I'm lying*, Kirk thought.

"Jim, may I be of assistance?" Worry shone in the dark eyes.

Kirk smiled. "I'm not sure there's anything to assist with, old friend." He started to touch Spock on the shoulder, then awkwardly withdrew his hand, as the lift doors opened on the bridge. "But thank you."

That exchange served only to enhance Spock's disquiet, for Kirk had unwittingly revealed his discomfort, demonstrating an unprecedented awkwardness with the Vulcan.



Late that evening, Uhura finally ascertained James Kirk was not in any of his usual haunts. His favorite, the observation deck with its clearsteel windows, would be shuttered during warp drive, so she tried the Officer's Lounge, usually deserted at this hour. She found the captain alone, pacing and deep in thought in one of the conversation pits. Unnoticed, she quietly proceeded to another such area, settled herself and began softly strumming the lute she had brought along, humming with the instrument.



Unable to stand the confines of his cabin another minute, Kirk had sought a quiet place, where he had room to pace in earnest, uninterrupted by anyone. What is the meaning of those images? Why are there three? I know each being has multiple facets, but why am I seeing these three — and why are they so stereotyped? And why now? I know . . . Kirk's mind was rolling the problem around as he paced back and forth, but no answers were forthcoming. Basically he was just chasing his tail. A sound began to penetrate his consciousness. Listening closely, he noted the quiet sweet tones of a lute, and the equally sweet soft tones of Uhura.

He looked around, surprised and slightly perturbed. "Nyota, what are you doing here?" The lounge, as she had anticipated, was otherwise deserted.

"Actually, I was looking for a place to have a quiet session with myself. Am I disturbing you?"

Kirk moved to the same pit area, settled himself in one of the comfortable chairs and looked closely at the beautiful Nubian. "No, you're not disturbing. I enjoy your music. Your voice is beautiful. Would you sing something for me?"

Uhura began a song from Aldabaran III which she knew he liked. Kirk's eyes closed as the notes from the ballad floated over him. The frown and worry lines eased from his face. As the last notes faded, Kirk sprang to his feet, grabbed Uhura by the shoulders and crushed her to him, kissing her soundly until both panted for breath. Pushing her from him with the last shred of his restraint, he grated. "What do you expect from me? What do you want?"

An astonished Uhura heard herself say, "Whatever you need to be or do or give."

Kirk shook his head as if to clear away the fog. "What am I doing?! I'm acting like an adolescent — all hormones and no caring or consideration." He drew her close again, gently, stroking her arm. Concern showed in the wide hazel eyes. "I am sorry, Nyota. Did I hurt you?"

"No, Jim," came the husky voiced reply as she touched his hand lightly.

"I need to talk . . . mmmm." He found himself with a speech impediment in the form of Uhura's satin lips. Conversation was put on hold.



Kirk had invited Spock to stop by his cabin when the initial processing of the research data on the nebula was completed. Although it was fairly late in the ship's evening when the first run finished, Spock considered the findings significant enough to report. It would also give him reason to check up on Jim — and perhaps discover what disturbed his friend. The eyebrow rose in surprise when the door chime went unanswered, despite his sensing the Captain's presence.

The door chime startled Nyota out of a warm, hazy half-slumber. "Shhh," Jim murmured as he pulled her closer. "It's just Spock. I forgot I told him to stop in when he finished the computer run. He'll go away shortly." Of course, I'll get the full Vulcan stare to tomorrow, but later for that!

As frequently happened, the range of perception of Vulcan ears had been forgotten. The faint murmurs were enough to change Spock's mind about persisting. As he turned toward his own cabin, the Vulcan illogically hoped whoever was with his friend would provide relief from whatever disturbed Kirk.



James Kirk lay, staring at the ceiling, confusing thoughts rampaging his mind. *This is the first time I've ever been sexually involved with any of my crew. Well, it IS my crew. Other captains 'fraternize,' why not me too? Maybe that'll take the edge off whatever is bothering me. I know I've changed. But I don't know how to 'fix it.'* A wave of unanticipated pain washed over him. Damn it, why did Genise have to leave me!? Why does it have to keep bothering me? It's done and over. I have to go on living! Involuntarily, Kirk shivered, his fists clenched. Warm arms drew him close; she held him, mumbling soothing words. Slowly the pain he wanted to deny eased. He turned and snuggled deeper into the welcoming arms.



In the days that followed, nothing really definitive occurred, but nothing was quite normal, either. Kirk found himself assaulted almost nightly with variation of the dream. Nothing blatantly significant. Nothing he could really sink his teeth into. The real ramifications seemed to lie just beyond his conscious awareness, which he found incredibly disturbing. And extremely tiring. He was exhausted.



The aberrancies occurring aboard Enterprise defied the most strenuous logic and analytical efforts, which frustrated most humans to distraction. Spock merely sighed quietly to himself and began another level of analysis. The captain was obviously different; he had become almost uncommunicative except on duty, refusing to leave his cabin now for anything but an occasional meal, and mandatory physical training. Their chess games, the easy camaraderie, and smooth command were a thing of the past. In addition, Spock was afflicted with visions which disturbed his self-concept and tested his self-control. So far, he had been unable, despite deep meditation and great searching of self, to determine the cause or purpose of the visions.



The One is all and all is One. Repetition of the mantra did not bring the usual calm and access to the deeper levels of meditation. Steadily, Spock began to search within himself for the vision and its meaning.

The desert winds blow hot against his skin as Spock now faces the Human image of himself, the full Vulcan image, and a new figure: that of James Kirk. Looking first to the Vulcan image, Spock says: "In your initial appearance in my meditation or vision, you stated you may be of service to me. In what way is that possible? What do you propose to each me?"

The Vulcan image responds in totally flat tones. "That you may become aware of the illogic of your behavior; the degree to which you have adopted human customs rather than following the Way."

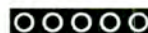
"If this is to be a discussion of the dichotomy of my being, why is Captain Kirk's image here?"

Again the Vulcan duplicate speaks, "Because you have made him part of yourself." Spock's eyebrow rises. All his barriers slam into place, but he cannot withdraw from the vision. It continues, independent and unbidden within his mind.

The human image of Spock finally speaks, "You are the most unique combination of genetic and cultural heritage in this galaxy. As a result, yours has been the hardest path to follow, for your upbringing led you in the Way of the Vulcan, and your mastery was good."

The Vulcan image continues. "But your continued contact with humans has led you to abandon the Way and to behave in a manner most illogical at times. You have accepted this Human as t'hy'la, yet he openly gloats and praises you when you deviate from the Way. How can you call yourself Vulcan?" Ice forms at the edges of the Vulcan's words. The stern visage is cast of granite.

"Spock," says the human version, "neither of us alone is you. Both of us must actually be combined, not merely suppressed. You must learn to live with both of us and truly integrate us or you will die. Infinite Diversity is a worthy goal, but most difficult to adhere to when the diversity is within. Ultimately, you must choose what and who you will be. Prosperity and long life." The voice faded with the vision and Spock found himself alone again. An aching emptiness bid for his attention. He refused to acknowledge it.



As the Old Ones drifted through the universe, they noted the level of development here and there, realized the lack of consistency. They felt joy at some startling leaps of consciousness to the reality of the unity of all forms; sadness at the unenlightened retention of force and destruction of life as bases of controlling and governing. They were pleased by the development of the humanoid species on one small planet.

The eldest, and first speaker noted, "These children have done well. They resist the divisive urges that still arise occasionally. Their efforts toward peace and unity are most commendable." The Old Ones gathered dust particles to themselves, and formed a cloudlike structure around them. "Let us see their reactions to an unfamiliar alien presence."

Later, when they had completed the assessment of development on that planet, the cloud dispersed and as unencumbered thought forms, the Old Ones moved on into the center of this galaxy, noting in the far distance, a tiny ship approaching.

"The approaching vessel has been directed toward us, Elder.

"It contains beings of many types, Elder," came a different thought sign. "It may prove an interesting study."

"As it appears to be moving toward the solar system we just left, let us appear in its path." And where there had been nothing at all, a huge dust cloud formed.



"Bridge to Captain Kirk." Kirk's feet hit the floor and he was wide awake as the yellow alert flashed overhead. In the background he could hear Lt. O'Fori's deep voice notifying personnel by all-ship intercom.

"Kirk here. What's up, Spock?"

"Captain, sensors indicate a cloud-like formation of unusual character and size between Enterprise and Shanti. It just 'appeared.' It was not detected by the sensors prior to 53.58 seconds ago."

"On my way. Kirk out." The tone of Spock's voice had indicated the situation was important but not critical, so Kirk took time for a quick tumble through the fresher and a new uniform. Minutes later, he arrived on the bridge, looking eager and interested. He and Spock did their usual change-of-command dance around the center chair.

"Report, Mr. Spock."

"This entity is of no known substance, Captain. It is neither gaseous nor liquid, and gives no density readings at all, despite what you see. Elemental surveys are currently underway. We should not be able to perceive it at all, yet obviously we do see it. It is not moving but hangs directly in our path to Shanti."

Kirk nodded as he assimilated the meager information. "Red Alert," he ordered.

In the background, Uhura, also awakened and just arrived on station, could be heard broadcasting the status change. The bridge lighting changed to red, tactical screens showed relative positions of cloud and ship.

Kirk hit the all-ship intercom on his command console. "This is the captain. We are about to employ evasive maneuvers to avoid contact with a cloud-like formation of unknown intentions which has not communicated with us, but which is blocking the path to our current assignment. Maintain battle stations and grab hold of something. We may have a bumpy ride. Kirk out!" He nodded to the helmsman. "Evasive maneuvers, Mr. Sulu."

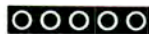
"Aye, sir. Standard evasive now." Commander Sulu flipped switches and the scene on the viewer changed as the great ship wheeled to starboard. The cloud moved off the left of the viewscreen, but immediately moved again to center screen.

"Captain, the cloud is moving with us! It's staying in our path." Repetitions of the attempt to avoid and evade proved equally useless.

"How long until contact with this cloud?"

Estimate 8.358 hours at our present speed, Captain."

"Very well, go to Yellow Alert. Keep the shields up! Uhura, continue sending universal language message of friendship."



Time dragged on. Kirk felt like he was slogging through a heavy stasis field. Even awake he was beginning to see faint visions in his head, much like the recurring variations of the dream. And he did not understand his sudden, violent surge of masculinity. He had a quick meal at the mess hall, then went to his quarters to catch upon the ubiquitous paperwork. The cloud, or whatever it was, was making no threats, essentially doing nothing at all except being there. He'd had the crew stand down from Yellow Alert, though the screens remained in place. No reason to tire his people now and maybe take the edge off their readiness. They might need it later. Spock was contentedly engrossed in gaining all possible scientific data about the phenomenon, so Kirk had left the conn in those capable hands.

Gods, I'm tired! Kirk rubbed his eyes with his knuckles and ran a hand through his hair. Got to get some sleep. He focused his eyes with some difficulty, despite the bifocals, and began reading the top report.

And he finds himself sitting in a cozy club booth with a beautiful woman — the woman in his dreams. "Who are you? What did you mean you're part of me?" He offers her one of his more charming smiles. "You're much too beautiful to be me."

"But I am you, Jim. I'm that seductive part of you; the part that loves without fear, and without confusing love with sex. I'm the part that seeks and enjoys touching and being touched."

"I'm the bearer of that intuition you prize so highly and depend upon so much. Yes, it's called woman's intuition, but only because women are usually more open to their feelings and perceptions."

"I'm also the part you hate most: the part whose feet don't touch the floor from the command chair; the part of you that seems off balance. I can't use muscles, so I have to use wits and wile.

"I'm the part of you that enjoys being equal with a partner rather than in control; the part that doesn't want or need to command and isn't afraid of losing control or command." Kirk winces at that. "I'm the nurturing part," she continues.

"So what am I supposed to do with you? With this information?" A frown of consternation wrinkles the tall forehead.

"Feel me as yourself. Integrate me with the other parts, for we are all you. You can only survive by learning to love and accept each facet of yourself, and by combining all these abilities and traits."

And she was gone and Kirk was left staring at the latest crew fitness report.



"Nyota, are you telling me Jim is having an identity crisis? That's crazy!"

"Well, Doctor, he vacillated from being very macho and alpha male to concern and caring almost effeminate in its manner. And there is nothing effeminate about Jim Kirk! But the clincher to me was asking what women look for in men — what qualities besides physical attractiveness. He seemed to be searching for the right combination, somehow."

McCoy frowned thoughtfully. "It seems early for his mid-life crisis. He says he's feeling stale, like everything is repetitive; and he IS getting older. Maybe he's afraid of losing control. *He's lost Genise. It's probably the first time a woman ever walked out on him*, thought the physician. And now he's got Nyota wrapped around his little finger. Is he just using her? The rest of McCoy's mind connected with his mouth and he continued. "That would account for the increase in macho behavior. But it doesn't completely account for the searching and lack of confidence. Thanks, Nyota."

The physician looked closely at the lovely Nubian, noting the changed hair style, the more-than-usual lilt in her voice. *She's got a bad case of Jim Kirk*, he thought. McCoy felt distinctly guilty for having even joked about an affair. "You know, I didn't seriously mean you should have an affair with Jim, or even take him on as a duty or a project." The craggy face looked thoroughly chagrined. No telling what this relationship means to Jim — or what it will do to Uhura. McCoy kicked himself mentally for what had been a joking, impulsive statement.

The communications officer flashed him a smile that spoke volumes. "It's not a duty, Leonard. Jim is badly hurt. He needs to be free of that pain. When one of us isn't free, none of us can be." And she glided into the corridor, leaving McCoy to wonder what sort of freedom she really meant.



"Request permission to speak with you, Captain." Spock's voice was utterly devoid of inflection, a sure sign the first officer was controlling hard.

"Of course, Spock. Come in and sit down."

"I would prefer to remain standing, sir." With back rigid, arms locked behind him and face carved from stone, Spock said, "Captain, I recommend you request immediate replacement for your Science Officer. My resignation is effective immediately after we finish our assignment on Shanti."

The words fell like lead weights, each hammering at Kirk's guts. "But why, Spock? Are you ill? Is it . . . biology?"

Hooded eyes bored out from the slightly green pallor, but Spock refused to meet his friend's eyes. "No, Captain. I am increasingly unable to . . . control . . . My logic is . . . not . . . intact. Such behavior compromises the performance of my duties as a Starfleet officer, and is unacceptable to me as a Vulcan. I must return to Vulcan and practice mastery." Kirk held his face muscles in a mask nearly as tight as Spock's. He wondered what beset his friend to require such radical action.

"Spock, look at me!" Kirk commanded. The Vulcan complied with reluctance. This human could read his thinking too well from his eyes and body language. He locked eyes with Spock, seeking answers in the dark orbs; willing the first officer to respond. He pushed his thoughts hard at the Vulcan. *Spock! Let me in! Let me help.* Spock needed all his barriers against the human's warmth and desire to help. He dared not open the link. The dark eyes were chips of obsidian, the first officer only slightly less rigid than stone. Kirk's shoulders slumped in defeat. "Okay, Spock. Dismissed."

The Vulcan turned without a word, his departure stopped by his friend's parting words: "I hope you'll be able to tell me what bothers before you leave." Kirk's voice was heavy, reflective of his feelings at that point. "If I'm to lose not only the best First in the fleet, but my brother as well, I'd like to know why." Spock was thankful his face was not visible as he strove for control and moved into the corridor.



Kirk sat stonily unmoving as the door closed behind the first officer. *Damn! First Genise leave me, now Spock. What's next? Am I going to lose the Enterprise too? Am I losing control? Why is this happening?* Once utterly cocksure of himself to the verge of arrogance, Kirk was now nearly paralyzed with fear. The waves of self-pity and pain which intermittently assailed him, seemingly at the worst possible times, struck again. *Why me?* he moaned to himself. His other aspect muttered, *Get a grip on it James T. A lot of lives are depending on you. You've got to keep going, with or without Spock.* But the rational part of Captain James T. Kirk acknowledged the major role his Vulcan first officer and friend had played in the success and fame of Enterprise, and of one James T. Kirk. *Can I do it without him?* An uncontrollable shudder struck him.



"Open hailing frequencies, Commander."

"Hailing frequencies open, sir."

"This is the USS Enterprise. We come in peace and want to communicate with you. This is Captain James T. Kirk of the starship Enterprise, United Federation of Planets. We come in peace. Please communicate." Kirk looked at Uhura.

"No response, Captain," came the communications officer's mellow voice, accompanying a negative head shake.

"Contact with the cloud entity in 5 minutes, mark!" came Chekov's tense voice.

"Go to Red Alert." The klaxons screamed and red lights flashed as battled stations were staffed. The bridge became the scene of quiet scurrying as relief and back-up personnel again took their places at the battle-related and redundant consoles.

"Contact . . . now!" Chekov's strained voice fell into deep silence. And nothing happened. No bumps, no changes in sensor readings, no effects on the shields. Nothing. Almost. Silence echoed. Kirk suddenly became aware of the stillness beneath his feet just as the communicator squawked.

"Scott here, Captain! The engines have shut down by themsel's!"

"Well, start them up again, Mr. Scott."

"Aye, sir, but there's no reason we can find why they quit at all! There's no traceable energy drain. Phasers and shields are at full power, and all major systems are working fine! It's just ma bairns won't run!"

Kirk's brow furrowed. "Well, keep at it, Scotty."

"Aye, sir. Scott out!"

"Explanations, Spock?" Kirk looked expectantly at the Vulcan.

"None, Captain. We have too little real data on which to make an assessment. It would seem logical to assume the cloud is not hostile, as it could have completely 'turned off' the Enterprise as easily as it caused the engines to stop."

That wasn't what Kirk had wanted to hear. "Phasers at full power, Mr. Chekov. On manual. Shields on full."

"Full power now, Keptin. Manual control."

"Shields at maximum, sir."

"Fire all phasers, wide dispersion." The great ship bucked slightly as her full and most formidable weapons lit up surrounding space. When the phaser energy had dissipated, the faint, foggy look of the surrounding cloud was gone. Nothing else had changed. Kirk looked at Spock, who consulted his instruments, then gave a negative headshake. He felt the tightness in his gut. "Uhura, jettison recorder," he said quietly.

"Aye, sir . . . Captain, I can't!" Kirk whirled the command console around to face Uhura. "The firing mechanism doesn't work! No communications channels working, either, sir. NO static, just silence!" The communications officer's voice had risen just slightly as she quickly checked her board, searching for the cause of the malfunctions.

"Fascinating." The soft baritone was the only sound on the bridge. The entire crew seemed to hold its collective breath.

"We can't fight, we can't run and we can't communicate! Now what can we do?" Kirk was addressing himself as much as his first officer who now stood beside the command chair.

"Perhaps, Captain, we should simply wait to see what the cloud — or — entity wants," came the thoughtful reply.

Kirk scowled. "I don't wait well, Spock. This thing has my ship! My ship and crew are at risk!" And very clearly in Kirk's head came a voice without sound: "*Your ship is not at risk, your soul is.*" The sturdy body shivered involuntarily, a motion noted by Spock.

"Jim?" the Vulcan inquired softly, eyebrow rising.

"You have the conn, Spock!" Kirk would have bolted off the bridge, but for the Vulcan blocking his way, his grip on Kirk's arm firm and totally unbreakable.

Spock's voice was so quiet it traveled only the short distance to Kirk's ears. "Captain, according to Starfleet regulations, leaving the bridge during Red Alert with the ship in peril is tantamount to dereliction of duty. I do not believe you wish to pursue that course of action."

Knowing the first officer was correct as usual, Kirk quickly employed his relaxation techniques, trying valiantly to overcome the panic feelings. Jaw muscles tensed as he sought control. The hazel eyes plainly showed the strain. My God! I'm losing my mind! I'm hearing voices that aren't there! What do the regulations say about that? his frantic mind gabbled at him. Clenching his teeth, Kirk resisted saying anything. If I tell Spock I'm hearing voices, he'll have to relieve me of command. The mere thought of his worst fear being realized gave impetus to his control efforts.

Spock observed the near-brutal effort Kirk used to control his flight response, having earlier noted the human's instantaneous increase in heart rate, breathing and temperature; now perceiving the less rapid slowing as relaxation efforts took effect.

Seeing the command mode regained, Spock released Kirk's arm, saying "Preliminary sensor scans are nearly complete, Captain. Once finished, if there is nothing immediately threatening, you may order Yellow Alert. Regulations state the ship's commander may be away from the bridge for short intervals for 'reasons of the utmost importance' during periods of Yellow Alert." Moving to the science station, the Vulcan focused his attention on his instruments. "Scans are entirely negative, Captain. There is no evidence of immediate threat to us. We can stand down to Yellow Alert."

Kirk so commanded and made for the turbolift, waiting until the doors closed before allowing himself to sag against the wall. He gave the command for sickbay as his body began to shake again. For once McCoy wouldn't have to fight with him. He was losing his mind! Hearing things that weren't there!

"Come into my office, Jim. Spock said you were coming."

How the hell did he know I wasn't heading for my cabin . . . or the observation deck? Kirk wondered. That's where I usually go to sort things out. He was white to the eyes and McCoy noted the many signs of massive shock.

"Bones, this time I've really cracked! Just now on the bridge I heard a voice in my head. It wasn't like the mind meld with Spock at all. Just this voice without any sense of presence telling me my ship wasn't at risk, my soul was!" Kirk paced back and forth within the confines of the small office. "I've been having these weird dreams, too. Several forms, all different, all claiming to be me — even a woman! They keep telling me I need to 'love my facets'; to integrate the parts of myself. I thought I'd done that long ago."

McCoy had never seen fear on Kirk's face, but the unfamiliar look now residing on the open visage came close. The captain was one of the strongest, best integrated people he knew. What could push him to this point, McCoy wondered. *Surely, this isn't just about Genise . . . Jim's never reacted like this to any woman.* He employed his best soothing, old country doctor persona. "I'll need to run a few tests on you, Jim, but from what you're telling me, it sounds very much like schizophrenia." Kirk's face held a blank, questioning look. "It's a disease of the thought processes and consequently of behavior due to chemical imbalances in the brain. It's not often seen since the 21st Century, when it was discovered diet played a major role in mental health. With diet and medications, it's all but eradicated," McCoy concluded.

"But that would remove me from command!" Kirk's voice rose; anguish tinged the handsome features. McCoy reached out to touch and soothe his friend when Spock's voice cut in.

"I believe the diagnosis of schizophrenia is incorrect, Doctor, as I am having similar visions and the chemical and neurohumoral deficiencies involved are not found in Vulcans.

"The . . . instability . . . caused in my control, however, is rendering me unable to continue my duties. I have already requested to be replaced immediately. That was, however, prior to our encounter with, and subsequent envelopment by, this cloud entity.

The Vulcan's use of the term 'entity' finally sunk into Kirk's frantic mind. "Entity, Spock? You mean this cloud thing is alive?" The idea of an enemy so close and so totally in control of his ship stunned the commander. The impact of this vital information caused a further paling of the normally tan skin. I missed something that important! Maybe I AM unfit to command! thought a devastated Kirk. McCoy intervened at once, after casting a glare at the Vulcan.

"That'll wait a few minutes, Spock," said McCoy. "How did you know what was happening to Jim?"

"The Captain has acted in a somewhat uncharacteristic manner since our last leave. However, for the past 6.347 days, there has been even more aberrancies in his behavior. I therefore believe the problem has existed for at least that period of time. He has not discussed the situation with me, a sure sign he is encountering emotional distress from which he endeavors to 'protect' me. He is severely stressed in those dreams, Doctor, far more than he will admit."

Spock turned to face his captain, compassion in the dark eyes. "I heard your shout in my mind, Jim."



Amazement warred with embarrassment on Kirk's face as he recalled his dreams. "But I'm not"

"You have reached me before, during times of severe stress, Captain," the deep voice commented quietly, as Spock remembered the mind calls which had allowed him to find and rescue his commander and friend on several occasions. "Usually the situations were life-threatening. I believe the dreams may be perceived as threatening — perhaps not to your life, but to your perceptions of . . . your . . . self . . . of James T. Kirk." The deep voice was soft as Spock reluctantly dragged out each word. His own feelings . . . thoughts . . . were contained with the expenditure of great amounts of energy.

The clinical part of McCoy's mind watched this exchange carefully, noting both men were controlling hard, something the physician had never seen before. Another part of the physician's being grappled with fear. What's happening to them? What's happening to me? I keep seeing Jocelyn, telling me what a wimp I am; complaining how little time I spend with my family! His thoughts were pulled back to the present as Spock continued.

"You have never shown panic before, under far more stressful situations. That is why I believe the dreams to be . . . related in some way to this cloud phenomenon." Spock himself was as surprised at his words as the two humans. He had no logical basis for the outrageous theory, however, it seemed appropriate to him. "And it is a living entity, Jim. The behavior it demonstrated in following our evasion efforts clearly indicated some degree of thought." Turning to McCoy he said, "On the bridge, at the time the captain heard the voice, I felt a pressure in my mind. No voice, no attempts at telepathy, and neither hostile, nor painful." Spock did not mention the sensation of pressure momentarily cut him off mentally from everyone and everything else, far beyond the capability of his own mental barriers; a most disquieting feeling.

Kirk's mind was whirling with ideas. Spock admits to having visions as well! What possible facet of his being could disturb him so much? And what kind of entity is this that could engender visions in a Vulcan? Spock knows himself better than anyone I've ever met. Kirk looked at his friend, open face plainly showing concern. "Spock, these visions. What can possibly upset your serenity? Can I help?"

But Vulcan logic and controls were firmly back in place as Spock replied. "Unknown, Captain." There may be no help for any of us, came his unbidden thought. Silence pervaded the small room as each of the friends considered the ramifications of instability in the ship's two ranking officers.

"Spock," Jim's voice was soft, hesitant as he broke the thoughtful silence, "does meditation help you maintain your calm?"

Eyebrow raised in surprise, Spock nodded once. "The techniques are useful in achieving a degree of peace and allowing me to objectively observe a problem."

"Could you teach me the basics? Would you? It might help me maintain a perspective until Bones can find a cure, or we figure out what this is." *Maybe it'll keep me together so you don't have to relieve me from command.* The slightest flattening of affect in Kirk's voice told of his stress. He held his face and tone steady. He would not burden the Vulcan further.

"It would be a worthwhile endeavor, Jim," Spock agreed, "when we have secured from Yellow Alert." Not for the first time, Spock regretted his inability to find the words which would provide comfort to his friend and captain. Dark eyes sought to reassure.

Something in the dark eyes touched Kirk. Hazel eyes dropped. he felt Spock's concern and clamped a tighter hold on his face and feelings. *Not this time, my friend*, he thought. *You have helped me so many times, but not this time. I can feel the wall which hides your own distress. I will not add to your burdens . . .* With those thoughts, Kirk realized how trapped he felt — how alone.

And across the room the Vulcan realized what had happened and noted the escalating discomfort of his own loneliness. Like its predecessor, the feeling was shoved ruthlessly into unawareness. The ache Spock kept refusing to acknowledge was growing.



"This is the Captain speaking. By now you all know we are surrounded by a cloud-entity which does not communicate with us, and which is preventing us from communicating with anyone outside itself. It is also keeping our engines inactive. Despite this, we do not appear in immediate danger from this . . . entity, whatever it is. I am, therefore, cancelling Yellow Alert. Secure from battle stations. Maintain shields." Kirk took a deep breath before continuing, noting almost subliminally, changes in the lights flashing on the communications boards as all stations returned to peaceful status.

"Doctor McCoy has informed me of the changes occurring as differing aspects of ourselves appear. The only consolation I can give you is that it is happening to us all in varying degrees." Kirk paused a moment, looking at Spock. "It won't be easy for any of us. Be gentle with each other and with yourselves. Kirk out."



Sitting quietly, back straight, eyes closed, hands palm up on knees, Kirk endeavored to focus his entire attention on his breathing. His thoughts raged and swirled, but he persevered. Slowly he gained a degree of breath control; slowly the feelings of anxiety began to dissolve and he slipped into a place of peace.

After a time Kirk finds himself again in the vision, this time facing the soft, gentle image of himself. *Here we go again! "What or who are you and what am I supposed to do with you?" His tone drips sarcastic disbelief.*

"Why Captain, I'm your alter ego. I'm the one who coordinates your facets so you're not an overbearing brute and fighter or a submissive and nurturing woman." The soft voice was pleasant to the ears, almost but not quiet his own.

"Yes . . . but you're just a bit . . . ah . . . effeminate yourself."

"Am I, really, or is that just your alpha's perception? Alpha can't love and nurture and care and be tender. Alpha can never admit it hurts. These qualities temper the alpha drive and allow you to function as a starship captain.

"You have yet to appreciate the attributes contributed by your female self: the receptiveness and willingness to accept others' control, the love, the caring, making the most of your famous intuition. All these are part of me and we're all part of you. You must love us all and accept us all, for that which is ignored or repressed will emerge to destroy you." He slowly returned to this level of consciousness.



Kirk signed the log and handed it back to the yeoman as McCoy arrived on the bridge. "Jim, what's happening with this cloud out there?"

"Nothing, Bones. Nothing at all. We're blind as a bat, dead in the water, and without any concrete ideas of how to remedy either situation." Kirk's tone bordered on the bitter. "How's the crew?"

"That's why I'm here." Worry carved deep lines in the craggy face. "Harb tells me more people are using the meditation facilities and there's a definite increase in the numbers attending religious services. I'm getting lots of requests for sleeping pills, and complaints of strange dreams.

"Several people are convinced they're going nuts 'cause they're seeing several images in their dreams, all claiming to be them. A few, those with the highest esper ratings, claim to see multiple but not identical images of friends and co-workers. I have three of the esper/sensitive crew in sickbay undergoing tests to determine why they see what they see. We may have to end up doing a psychovid-scan."

Kirk scowled at the thought. While he acknowledged the psychovid-scanner as a useful tool for determining one's motivations under certain circumstances, the idea of having one's most intimate thoughts bared left him highly uncomfortable. As for the rest of McCoy's report, he wondered if the whole crew was going crazy. Finally, he said, "Department Heads meeting in 10 minutes. And bring Lt. Tanzer with you. Meanwhile, Bones, start every available lab facility checking to see if we've been exposed to a virus or gas or something toxic which could cause massive hallucinations."

Kirk's face was grim as he opened the meeting. The room was filled with tense faces; faces of people he had worked with for years, and come to consider family; newer faces with less-known reactions. "As you already know, the Enterprise is without engine power and unable to move. While the ship continues to function at full power otherwise, we are going nowhere and are unable to communicate. All frequency channels are dead and we are unable to launch emergency records. We are cut off. Mr. Spock will brief you on the cloud entity."

"The screens in front of you show the few parameters we have been able to ascertain regarding the cloud entity," Spock indicated the computer monitor at each seat. "The entity is one unknown in our galaxy's experience. It apparently has infinite power and the ability to discriminate, since it selectively shut down our engines, while leaving personnel and the ship itself, intact and undamaged. There is no way to determine how long that condition will last."

Kirk's jaw clenched with tension and frustration at the Vulcan's last comment. Neither he nor Spock had previously verbalized any potential for a violent change in the current situation, however the thought had high priority in the list of factors to be considered. Such potential always existed, of course, but it was difficult to contemplate. And dangerous not to.

The Vulcan continued in measured tones. "The entity has the ability to allow us to scan it superficially, or to disappear to our sensors and still maintain complete control. Initial and superficial scans indicate the usual space dust, consistent with an asteroid field. However there are no such asteroid fields chartered within this portion of the gamma 3 sector. There is no single element of high enough

density or concentration to cause the engines to malfunction." Scott sighed deeply. He had hoped Spock could find the cause.

"This entity has withstood the full firepower of a starship and been, insofar as we can determine, unaffected. For all practical purposes, this ship and its crew are isolated from all known experiences outside. Given the mental and emotional changes occurring within the crew, I believe we are being examined. There is insufficient data to offer even conjecture as to the reasons, if any, for the examination. Such vast powers as the entity has exhibited indicate it may have the ability to affect our perceptions of reality, thereby affecting the fiber of our very being, influencing what we think, say and do."

As Spock finished his briefing and started to sit down, he heard very clearly the voice without sound: "We do not control you. Each of you alone controls your own being and your development." To those watching, the first officer hesitated just a moment, then sat down. His face blanked of expression. Kirk noted the change immediately.

"Spock?! What is it?" Kirk's concern was palpable.

"A new dimension has been added, Captain. I am unable to provide analysis without further study." Spock's affect gave new meaning to the concept of 'flat.'

Kirk's voice was tight, matching the tight frown on the high forehead. To McCoy, that voice of command was as close to desperate as McCoy had ever heard it. "Bones, what's happening to us, to the crew?"

"Well, Jim," McCoy's drawl was as thick and slow as cold syrup, a good sign the physician was greatly concerned, but trying to use his country doctor persona to ease tension for his colleagues. "We started this cruise with a 99.93% efficiency rating overall. That's about normal for this crew just after shore leave. I'll let Harb tell you about the changes in patterns of the crew.

"Sickbay is getting a lot of complaints about trouble sleeping. This crew works hard and plays hard. They're the last folks in the galaxy to require sleepin' pills, or to consistently and in large numbers report strange or bad dreams. I'm getting reports of dreams where folks see two, three or even four different forms, all claiming to be themselves. Even awake, some people are seeing multiples or different phases . . . or facets . . . of their friends and co-workers. Those crew members with the highest stress, and those with the highest esper ratings were the first to be involved with the multiple phases, but the phenomenon is slowly and steadily affecting us all." McCoy spread his hands and shrugged, indicating he was finished.

"Thank you, Doctor. Mr. Tanzer?"

"Captain, as you know, the play patterns of crews change for various reasons and under different stresses. One of the most consistent patterns is the composition of any given group at any given time. What I'm seeing now is an apparent paradox of behavior. There are more groups in all areas, even at off hours, when usually only the nocturnal species or solitude-loving are about. They're staying in groups longer and becoming closer knit. The composition of the groups seems to matter very little.

In 'normal' groups, individuals seek each other due to common interests or needs. These groups remain fairly stable throughout a voyage, with minimal change of personnel. Now we're seeing

dissimilar, and sometimes almost disliking individuals banding together — rather as though it is important to be with others instead of being alone.

"The level of pairing and sexual activity has increased, if the increased use of the screened privacy areas is any indication. But there does not appear to be any frantic quality to this upswing, as is sometimes seen in the face of extreme danger or sense of impending doom. In fact, just the opposite seems true. There is a more loving, more caring attitude prevalent.

"The meditation areas are much more heavily used than ever before, and the persons using them are frequently the same folks from the random composition groups.

"Attendance at all religious services is up by more than 30%. Computer search requests for religious information and data on souls and meditation have quadrupled. The communications board is something to see, Captain. I recommend it as a direct measure of the crews' thinking at this time." The chief of recreation gave a quick glance around the table at the familiar, now strained faces as he sat down.

"Thank you, Mr. Tanzer. Scotty?"

"Captain, I dinna ken an this. We've taken my poor bairns apart down to the matter-antimatter shields and we canna find the cause! There's no good reason why the engines won't run. More importantly, how can we continue ta have full power ta all areas wi'out the engines? The batt'ries canna sustain such usage this long!" The Chief Engineer was so distraught by this erratic behavior of his much beloved and thoroughly understood engines, his brogue was barely understandable.

Glaswegian, thought McCoy as he analyzed the change and thickening of the engineer's accent. Scotty's reaching his limits of coping. It's always easier to fight something openly than to sit and wait — or worse yet, be totally helpless like we are now. Bright blue eyes surveyed the tense faces, clinically analyzing and cataloging, noting which of the department heads showed the highest stress levels, the most symptoms of maxing out and beginning to decompensate. The physician's thoughts were brought back to the meeting by his commander's response.

"Do what you can, Scotty." Kirk's voice was gentle, acknowledging the sense of helplessness the whole crew was experiencing. "Recheck everything. Pair up your staff and change the teams from one area to another. Maybe one team will discover something another team missed. Maybe we have full power and are being prevented from seeing it."

Kirk took a deep breath and surveyed the 20 grim faces around him. "Gentlemen, we are alive. As long as we are, there is still hope. There must be a way out of this! Any other questions, comments, suggestions?" Lieutenant Commander Uhura indicated a desire to speak. "Uhura?"

"Captain, the change in communication status isn't limited to the mechanical and electronic equipment. Sir, there's a marked change in the communications between individuals, not just groups." Kirk's eyes flashed warning at her.

"Explain, Commander."

"Sir, I've noticed in the rec areas, people who are normally close to each other are drawing away. Not completely, just enough to be uncomfortable with each other." *Like you and Spock*, she thought. "It's as though people are afraid to let their closest friends see who they are or what they need. People

who have never been that close are finding each other's company pleasant." *Like you and me*, she added, silently.

"Behavior patterns have changed, too. Subtle changes in perspective are clear; a more caring or more distant attitude, an increase in normal aggressiveness or passive behavior. Whatever is happening to us, as Mr. Spock said, is certainly affecting who and what we are."

Throughout Uhura's comments, Spock's attention had been riveted to the beautiful Nubian. While he had teased her about her mind consisting of a chaotic web of tangled neurons, Spock knew the communications officer to be highly intelligent and a very fine judge of character. She also had the huntress' instinct for noting the strengths and weaknesses of those around her. *Indeed*, thought Spock, as he noted the look on the captain's face. *Perhaps this is why Jim has not chosen to confide in me.*

McCoy's ears were tuned like radar to Uhura's comments. *She's sayin' she sees and feels the rift between Jim and Spock, as well as the changes in Jim . . .* His musings were interrupted by the dismissal of the meeting.



Kirk took Harb Tanzer's advice and decided to check out the rec facilities as well as the comm boards. He wandered first through the holograph-and-computer-construct of woods in autumn, smelling the crisp, clean air, watching the many colored leaves falling gently. Harb came to greet his favorite customer. He walked alongside quietly, letting the captain set the time and tone of speech.

"You do a fine job, Mr. Tanzer. This is so realistic I could be on Earth. It's refreshing to soul and senses." Kirk sniffed, then took a long deep breath, appreciative of the momentary vacation from his command problems.

"Thank you, sir."

They walked on in silence, slowly. Finally the captain's thoughts returned to less pleasant topics. "Harb, what's your thinking about the changes in behavior and the groupings?" he asked.

"The chief of recreation stood in thoughtful silence for a moment, thinking of this man in the gold shirt, his responsibilities, his needs. "Each of us wants and needs to be whole, Captain. Every major religion on Earth and those throughout the humanoid and Vulcanoid species have a belief in the development of man's essence into a godhead or something similar, or a return of that essence or soul to the godhead at the end of life. In other words, to a completion, not an individuality.

For all our belief in the philosophy of Infinite Diversity, we feel our separateness, our aloneness. Sometimes the feeling is stronger than others. Each of us deals with it in a different manner. But each of us, in our heart-of-hearts, wants and needs to be complete, to touch the rest of us. We seek many ways to accomplish this — through families and group mind fusions, by prolific sexual activity, by brotherhoods and societies. Each is a search for wholeness, to help us feel loved and not alone."

"You're equating this phenomenon, this search for self, with a religious quest of some kind?" Kirk asked, surprise in his voice.

The silver head nodded. "In a way it is, Jim. In the sense that all our being or life may be seen as an area for development of the self into that godhead. We forget who we are and where we come from, so this is our 'work' in this life — to be complete."

"Thanks, Harb." As Kirk walked slowly away, his mind mulling over the new information, Harb Tanzer asked his own form of Deity to bless the captain and strengthen him to bear his burdens.

The communications 'boards' bore the usual requests for swaps, purchase or sale of information, supplies or services. But the majority of physical bulkheads, as well as much of the computer space assigned to this function, were devoted to open letters or quotations. Some comments exhorted all beings to repent and atone for transgressions, stating the Day of Oneness was approaching. Some were the sayings of poets, philosophers and prophets from a score of worlds. The quotations varied from LaoTse and Krishna of Earth, and Surak of Vulcan, to Vre'nath of Aldabaran IV, the Katuellan seer S'Rrrrow and Mehansa of Rigel III. Without exception, the quotations referred to recognizing or attaining Oneness, completion, wholeness, unity, or some variation on the theme. It would seem the entire crew was seeking the same goal.



Uhura was waiting for him when he returned from the rec department. Delight showed on his face. She kissed him quite thoroughly, the strength of her embrace beyond his expectations.

"Nyota, why are you doing this?" The soft, gentle caring Kirk was predominant at present.

There was a warm, thoughtful silence before she answered, "Maybe my need to be is as great as yours. And maybe we can't accomplish this . . . whatever it is we're doing . . . alone." The embrace lasted a long time, as each contemplated the situation, their own feelings, their relationship. At last, as though by mutual thought, they tightened the embrace momentarily, and let go of each other. Kirk fixed them both a drink and they sat sideways facing on the couch. "We've been friends for almost 20 years," Kirk began, as he looked at the lovely woman before him. "You're one of the most beautiful women I've ever met, but I've never had a sexual relationship with anyone in my command before. Why now? And why did I approach you with all the finesse of a Klingon?!" Chagrin touched the open face. "What is different now?"

A gentle smile greeted these questions. "I think it has to do with how we see ourselves, Jim, and as a result, how we see others." She hesitated for a moment, organizing her thoughts, frowning slightly with the effort to be both accurate and clear. "How I perceive you right now, is very different from how I have seen you in the past." At his raised eyebrow she continued. "I have always noticed you . . . as a handsome, virile, very masculine being; from a woman's perspective, a very fine specimen for a mate. You are healthy, strong, intelligent, and would be able to provide good genes for children and defend your family." Not for the first time, Nyota Uhura was thankful her coloring masked the acute embarrassment which flooded her cheeks. Chancing a glance at Kirk's face, she noted a slightly embarrassed half-smile on pinker than usual cheeks. "These are all perceptions from one of my own facets." A wry grin twisted her lips as she continued, "There's also part of me that is thoroughly outraged by your unthinking assumption that women are unequal to many tasks, such as commanding starships, becoming engineers or almost anything else that doesn't require sheer bull muscle or the ability to produce children!" Dark eyes flashed. Kirk had the decency to blush.

"I" He closed his mouth, considering carefully what Uhura had said. "It never occurred to me," he admitted. "It's just the way our society has evolved"

"No. It has evolved that way because women's abilities are ignored and denied! Still! You'd think humanity would have learned something in all these centuries." Taking a deep breath, Uhura raised her head, eyes meeting Kirk's. "I'm sorry."

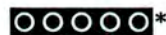
"I think I should be the one. Your opinions . . ."

"I am not apologizing for my opinions, but for allowing one of my pet peeves to put me on a soap box. You are not a bad person, merely unthinking. And part of me isn't pleased with second-class status. It's probably a good thing we have so many parts of us. Any one alone would be intolerable!" They laughed, somewhat ruefully, both aware and somewhat uncomfortable with the truths uncovered.

"You . . . mentioned you see me differently now. Different how?" came the slightly hesitant question. While Kirk was not sure he really wanted to hear this dissection of his personality, he had to find a handle to the behavior changes that were besetting all of them.

"I'm seeing a softer side to you — a side that can be and is hurt." Seeing his jaw clench she continued hurriedly, "It probably doesn't show to anyone who isn't . . . intimate with you, or doesn't know you really well." *Like Spock and Dr. McCoy.* "Everyone has that soft side, but yours never shows. I rather like the softer you," she said, thoughtfully. "You're more relaxed, like you're not busy proving something."

That sounds like McCoy. Am I really on a macho ego trip all the time? Noting it was nearly time for his shift again, Kirk excused himself and headed for the fresher. When he emerged, ready for duty, Nyota had gone back to her own quarters. His mind considered his new relationship with the communications officer. It had developed to depths unexpected by either. They shared far more than just a physical affair. They talked about feelings and ideas which James Kirk had rarely discussed with anyone. Less serious conversations dealt with anything from art forms to music, to best leave planets and childhood dreams. They laughed, they played, they loved.



Spock stood, arms locked behind him, the epitome of Vulcan, facing an irate and worried McCoy. "Spock! You've got to eat! Your color is awful even for you and I know you're not eating! The servo controls indicate no use of Vulcan foodstuff either in your cabin or in the mess hall. Are you trying to kill yourself?" McCoy was flapping, obviously concerned for the first officer.

"Doctor, self-destruction without purpose is illogical. Vulcans can go for prolonged periods without nourishment, and as your scanners have verified, I am without any illness which you could either diagnose or cure. You will, therefore, desist from interfering in my affairs." The wooden face and icy tones served only to increase McCoy's anxiety, but the Vulcan turned and moved rapidly out of sickbay, ramrod straight, the emotions he was not supposed to exhibit under full restraint.

The same could not be said for McCoy. Knowing both the captain and first officer had multiple problems to deal with, the physician has resisted telling either of his friends the dreams and changes which were besetting him. Well into his own nurturing mode, McCoy's inability to locate the source of the crew's problems was causing the physician deep pain. He savagely jerked open the lower drawer of his desk and hauled out the bottle he kept for medicinal emergencies. Pouring himself a stiff slug, he downed it at a gulp. He was mumbling about damned green-blooded, pointed-eared goblins who were too stubborn to admit problems when Nurse Chapel appeared in the doorway. Her quick observation told

her much of the problem. "Doctor McCoy, I just saw Mr. Spock leave, and . . . Are you feeling ill?" Concern tinged the melodic voice.

"I'm jus' fine, Christine. "I'm watching my two closest friends self-destruct individually and collectively and the whole crew is afflicted with something I can't even find, let alone fix! Of course, I'm fine!" he grated, tears looming in the bright blue eyes. Christine Chapel crossed the room to him and wrapped her arms around him, pulling his head against her.

"Leonard, let me help." This was a man she had admired, respected and loved for years, never daring to admit it, never letting it interfere with her rigid personal and professional standards. She would willingly do whatever was necessary to help this caring, loving, very lonely person pull the pieces back together.

McCoy's arms wrapped around her and for several minutes he just allowed himself to experience her touch. She gently stroked his neck and ruffled the back of his hair. Her heartbeat was fast, and the physician noted the soothing quality that heartbeat had for him. He squeezed her tightly for a moment, then gently disengaged himself from her. Standing, he took her face in his hands and looked straight into her eyes, his own puddled and streaming. "Christine, it is a measure of your love and concern that you offer yourself in the face of my needs. I . . . I am deeply honored. Your offer is more tempting than you will ever know, but I can't accept. I have to deal with this myself. Your caring gives me strength to proceed." He kissed her lightly on the cheek and moved out quickly to his quarters. *Why do I have to be so god-damned noble!?* he snarled at himself. Whereupon the chief medical officer of the Enterprise threw himself on his bed, and for the first time in his adult life, cried himself to sleep.



By the time Kirk cleared the fresher, he knew it was going to be one of 'those' days. He had awakened from another episode of the dream in alpha mode, and had nearly embarrassed himself by flexing his muscles and posturing in front of the mirror. He felt ready to start a fight just for the sheer fun of pounding hell out of someone. The bridge almost provided the proverbial straw.

As he strode onto the bridge, Kirk's eyes did their usual scan, and he nearly stumbled over his own feet in surprise. Some of the crew were recognizable only by the stations they held.

At Communications sat a full-blood Bantu warrior, the Starfleet uniform in no way diminishing that dignity and splendor. The sight gave Kirk a rush of adrenalin as he geared up to fight. And what a fight it would be! A true test of strength! Immediately on the heels of these thoughts came, *My God! That's Uhura! I don't want to fight with him.. her . . . or anyone else! Got to get a grip on myself!* His thoughts were distracted by an unusual formality.

"Captain on the bridge," came Spock's voice, virtually without inflection, in double-Vulcan mode, as McCoy would say. Spock arose from the command chair and stated formally, "the conn is yours, Captain."

"Thank you, Mr. Spock." Might as well acknowledge the formality properly. As he seated himself in the center chair, Kirk wondered if he had started hallucinating or if he was still in his bed, dreaming. At helm sat a geisha, tiny, with elaborate coiffure, exquisite ouija and platform shoes. At navigation sat the spitting image of a Georgian farmer, stocky and stolid, complete with fur hat. "Good

mornink, Keptin." Kirk felt like he had walked into the dress rehearsal of a repertory company. *Who are all these people?* He did not like the all-too-obvious answer.

"Mr. Spock, do I take it the dream phenomenon is now affecting 'real life'?"

"Affirmative, Captain. We are each projecting a part of ourselves and each of us is seeing a facet of the others."

Discomfort sparkled in the hazel eyes as they locked with the Vulcan's obsidian chips. Spock was obviously controlling hard. "How long does this masquerade party continue?" *How much of ourselves are we willing to see? How many facets of our friends can we be comfortable with?* Kirk wondered to himself, afraid to verbalize the thoughts. The rebel part of his brain could not resist. *Whatsamatter, Jim-boy. 'Fraid everyone will see the great James T. Kirk isn't perfect, isn't really larger than life? You can't even control your wife! Are you really fit for command?* The thoughts seethed through his agile mind.

Spock noted the change in Kirk's expression, noted the faraway look in the hazel eyes, and chose not to inquire at this time. He responded to the initial question. "Unknown, Captain. Perhaps as long as we need to fulfill whatever requirements the cloud entity has set for us."

Kirk frowned, his attention fully focused now on Spock. "You're assuming the entity is controlling the phenomenon?"

"Negative, Captain. In fact, the entity has specifically denied participation in the changes occurring within us — and in our interactions with each other. It would appear we are responsible for these changes and projections." The Vulcan paused a few moments, as though considering something, then continued. "It would be illogical to think this crew would suddenly exhibit signs of mass hallucination when the stimuli for such are minimal. The levels of awareness and the intensity of phenomenon occurrence vary according to the persons involved, which would not be true with hallucinations of this magnitude.

"However," Spock dropped his voice to a pitch audible only the short distance to his Captain's ears. "I believe our insights into ourselves may be of primary importance in the outcome of the current situation."

"Speculate on the outcome, Spock," the captain invited. But the moment of human intuition was past.

"Speculation is illogical, Captain." Spock had reverted to full Vulcan mode. "There is insufficient data to make meaningful decisions. Indeed, there appear to be no viable decisions to be made regarding the ship and its circumstances at present. The most logical course would be the continued close observation of the cloud entity, and gathering of data. The greater the available data, the greater the possibility of a useful answer."

"Spo-ock!" Kirk's voice was controlled, dangerous, as his irritation grew. "Mr. Spock, I need your human intuition and interfacing qualities, as well as your Vulcan logic!"

"Captain," said Spock in clipped Vulcan tones which indicated disapproval, "I fail to understand your persistent belief in and reliance on some ethereal emotional quality." Blood rushed to Kirk's face and neck as he struggled with his anger.

"Dammit, Spock!" Kirk yelled, as all his unresolved anger and frustration of the last leave boiled up. "I don't have Vulcan logic! And I can't deal with Vulcan logic; I can't make it work, put it into a useful form! Without your human qualities, I can't employ your brilliant logic!" Kirk stopped, appalled at the stunning revelation he had just made; and suddenly overcome by the sense of isolation and loneliness. He shook his head sadly and looked at the Vulcan. Spock's mask did not change, but the dark eyes softened a bit, acknowledging the captain's difficulty, and the Vulcan's inability to do anything to help.

More softly, Kirk said, "I'm sorry, Spock. It's not your fault."

"As am I, Captain" came the somber response.

Kirk got up and paced around the bridge, trying to work off the tension he dared not release in anger. Facing Uhura, and unable to resist a taunt, he commented, "My how you've changed!" with a smirk on his face. "And you're out of uniform!" he mentioned, waving an arm at the man's red shirted uniform.

The deep voice chuckled. "The computer is suffering from overload, sir. I had to enlist Mr. O'Fori's assistance in obtaining a uniform which adequately covered this form. It kept handing me a dress in size 3. It only came to here, sir." The big hand indicated hip level.

"Mmmm, yes." Kirk mumbled. "I see the problem." He walked around the communications console, looking at the warrior from all angles. Uhura gave him equal scrutiny. "You look like a capable hunter" said Kirk. "Do you always get your prey?"

"Always, Captain," came the deep voice, with a chuckle and twinkle in the eyes.

Circling down to the helm, Kirk surveyed Sulu. "No wonder geishas were so highly prized," he commented with a leer which was only half faked. "You're really quite beautiful! But can you still drive?"

Sulu burst out laughing, voice slightly higher than usual. "Yes, Captain. I can still drive, but these high-heeled shoes are killing me!" Laughter rocked the bridge. The Vulcan's demeanor changed only by the elevation of his right eyebrow. By sheer force of will and a good deal of graveyard humor, they got through the shift without fights, murder or mayhem, as they learned about themselves and each other.

Leaving the bridge at the end of the shift, James Kirk thought to himself. *How long can this continue? What happens if tomorrow my form is female? Will I lose command? Can I deal any better with Spock's Human than with his Vulcan? How will I deal with a samurai or a babushka? Why are we playing this bizarre game of Who Am I? Anger surged through him. Who the hell is doing this and why? Is it just for sadistic pleasure? See how the tormented subjects react?* By the time he reached his quarters, Kirk's anger was nearly beyond control.



Spock rose from his meditation stone. He had validated again the logic of the course he had first considered soon after the appearance of Jim Kirk in his visions. Implementation had begun when he first heard of multiple-facet manifestations among the crew. The final steps needed done now. He moved rapidly toward sickbay. The slight dizziness told him his calculations were almost perfect. Far better to die than to bring shame or disgrace on his friend.

McCoy was speechless at Spock's request: "Doctor, you will lock me away in one of your isolation facilities and disable all viewing and communications devices. And you will tell no one." Spock's color had degenerated to a near-bilious shade. The Vulcan looked acutely ill, but the iron control remained on voice and features. McCoy ran a quick scan on Spock.

"My God, man! You're . . ."

"Now, Doctor. My death is far preferable to bringing disgrace upon Jim." The firm grip on McCoy's arm only aggravated his temper.

"Dammit, I'm a physician, not an assassin! I can't help you finish the job. I won't!" The physician tried to shake off the Vulcan's grip, all the while glaring at the angular features now showing such pain.

"Doctor, I would have preferred your assistance, however . . . I regret the discomfort this will cause." Spock caught the unconscious human before he slumped over, and carried him to his office. Placing McCoy carefully in his chair, with head lying in his arms on the desk, Spock turned to the isolation facilities. A swift blow disabled the communications mechanism. He had not time for finesse now. He pulled a board containing two chips from the medical computer which scanned the isolation rooms and closed his hand on it. Tiny pieces of plastic, metal and trisilicate dust fell to the floor. He proceeded into the stark, small room and closed the door. Then applying his vast Vulcan strength, he jammed the door into its housing.

Inside the cell, Spock settled himself on the bunk, stilled his mind, arranged his fingers in the tel'frensha'n configurations and began withdrawing his life forces.

Spock? SPOCK! he heard the cry through the telepathic link. He kept the link damped down. *No, my t'hy'la, I will not disgrace you.*



The four meet again, now joined by the image of Spock. Kirk looks at 'his' images, then says, "I'm not sure why you're here, Spock, but maybe you can help me sort this out."

A negative shake of the Vulcan image's head accompanies, "Unlikely, Captain. The visions appear to be specific to each individual."

The three images claiming to be parts of James T. Kirk converge on him, somehow threatening. The Vulcan image stands immobile, then turns and walks away. Spock? Something's wrong with him. SPOCK!

Kirk awakened abruptly, intuitively knowing something was wrong; unable to identify what. No siren or Red Alert; nothing that required him on the bridge or he'd have been called. An aching emptiness welled up inside him, painful, taking his breath. Spock! He instinctively touched the link and

felt — nothing! The soft warmth was gone! Something's wrong with Spock! he thought as he moved rapidly through the chessroom and pounded on the Vulcan's door. No answer! He barged in and found the first officer's quarters empty, the atmosphere still thick with the incense Spock used for meditation. Kirk slapped the wall communicator. "Bridge!"

"Bridge, sair!" came Chekov's voice.

"Is Spock there?" The captain could barely keep his voice level. The ache was building.

"No, sair. Mr. Spock isn't due on the bridge until next shift, Keptin." Kirk's head pounded. He felt dizzy and lightheaded. Fear drove him as he ran for the lift, narrowly missing collision with several of the crew. The turbolift took forever to arrive.

James Kirk burst into sickbay at a dead run, in total alpha mode. "Bones!" he shouted, barging unannounced into the physician's office. McCoy was holding his head in both hands, looking like warmed-over death. Kirk grabbed the physician's shoulders and spun him around in his chair. "Bones! Where's Spock? I can't find him . . . and something's very wrong with him!"

McCoy struggled to focus. Kirk began shaking him, furious. "Dammit, Bones, where is he? Tell me!"

Sadness flooded the craggy features as McCoy related the Vulcan's request, finishing with, "he's dying, Jim."

Kirk ran to the isolation unit, as McCoy tried to catch up. The door mechanism did not work. The physician stepped between his captain and the isolation room door, trying unsuccessfully to calm the captain and prepare him for the worst. "He's jammed the door from the inside, Jim," the physician said, sadly. "He didn't want us to see him, or find him, until it's over."

"Then I'll use phasers on it, but I will get it open. Where's your phaser, Doctor?" Kirk pounded on the door in frustration, yelling, "Spock! You can't die! It's not logical, dammit!" His mind screamed *Spock! No!*

"Here, Jim. Here's my phaser." McCoy proffered his seldom used or needed weapon. "This is one of the few times it may do some good."

But Kirk did not hear a word the physician said. He grabbed the weapon and started blasting out the lock and door jamb, prying, pushing and bulling his way into the room with the strength of desperation. He grabbed the Vulcan by the arms. "What the hell do you think you're going, Mister?" Anger flooded him, followed by pain which showed in his voice. "If you die there is only pain for all of us!"

As Kirk looked at the Vulcan mask and the tortured eyes, his voice softened; his female was becoming more predominant. "What can be so devastating you just go off and die, you can't even tell me? How can I help, Spock?" The last sentence was a plea.

The pain of Spock's soul showed plainly in the fevered eyes, but he remained silent and immobile.

Intuition flickered, sending strange thoughts through Kirk's mind. "This whole thing is related to the multiple images, isn't it? Today my alpha was overwhelming. I had great difficulty with your Vulcan, as you had with my image. None of us is really comfortable with all parts of our friends — or ourselves." Silence expanded on itself.

Finally, "The images are indeed part of the problem, Captain, though my tolerance for your forms is not an issue." The computer's voice had more inflection and animation than the First Officer's at that moment.

"Spock! Please, let me in!" Kirk pleaded. "You are not only the finest first officer in the Fleet, you are also my brother and my friend." As the human's female aspect gained ascendance, his intuition heightened. "You're hurt!" he exclaimed in sudden realization. "But not just hurt . . . you're . . . afraid?" Hazel eyes widened in amazement. "What can make you . . . can cause you so much distress?"

Kirk's concern radiated so tangibly a rock could have felt it. It fairly washed over the Vulcan. "Spock, I need you. You are not expendable! You are my brother, my only family now. Families love and share and help each other. You call me t'hy'la . . . If you consider me your brother, then please, please let me help." He held out his hands, pleading.

The silence lasted precisely an eternity, then Spock let out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding. He held out his hands, wrists crossed, palms up, in the greeting-touch of family. Jim touched the hands without hesitation and his mental barriers dropped unbidden. His reality twisted and writhed as they melded instantly, far faster than Kirk had ever experienced before. He gasped as the strength of Spock's emotions buffeted his consciousness. The Vulcan's pain washed over the human and the shame at having emotions and not controlling adequately. The Vulcan pillar of strength feared — not for himself, but for the possibility that his lack of control over the images and his feelings for Jim would embarrass and disgrace his captain and brother-friend!

Though Spock could read his thoughts in the meld as they formed, Kirk chose to speak aloud, to carefully choose his words. He needed to hear himself, to work out the ideas. "Spock, there is no shame in loving. It's a function of living. No being can exist without it. Your feelings . . . your love for me . . . could never embarrass or harm me in any way.

"There is nothing wrong with giving or receiving love. It's what distinguishes us from animals or from machines. It's the hardest of all emotions to deal with as it has so many forms and influences us in so many different ways."

Kirk's intuition peaked as he realized the function of the images. "That's it, Spock! That's what we're doing here! That's what we're all looking for! We have to see all the facets of ourselves and accept and acknowledge all of them to be whole beings. Sure, we all are taught that, but we rarely look at ourselves — really take a hard look at our facets and our abilities, both good and bad. And giving and receiving love is part of our beings." Someplace deep within him, a door opened again as feelings of tenderness and warmth surfaced. Friendship and love flowed through the link as James T. Kirk pulled his facets together. Slowly he recognized what had happened to him. Releasing the anger he had clung to, Kirk mentally wished Genise well. He felt lighter. He allowed his feelings for Spock to flow freely. Aloud, he cleared his throat. With flaming cheeks and tear-reddened eyes, he said, "Spock, I love you. You are truly my brother. Acknowledging that love allows me to be whole. It means I recognize you are a part of me."

The Vulcan mask dropped as Spock took a deep breath. Warring emotions showed plainly on the chiseled face. "Captain . . . Jim . . . you are indeed my brother. I am honored. I . . ." Kirk felt the last vestiges of shame dissipate as the feelings Spock could not verbalize flooded through the link.

"It's okay, Spock. I understand." The link widened as barriers at deeper levels dropped. The Human's heart swelled to bursting as he traveled the corridors of his brother's mind, seeing Spock as he really was, feeling the love and gratitude of that brother for encouraging him to be himself. Clearly he saw the images of Spock's vision. Warmth flowed around them. Jim realized he was no longer afraid his 'real self' would be unacceptable to Spock. He felt the full acceptance, and Spock's quiet joy at having his own loneliness alleviated.

Some time later, Spock asked, "What made you overcome your fear, Jim?"

"You would have died. And you are a part of me. I couldn't lose you, especially knowing it was because I couldn't or wouldn't admit my feelings — admit I can and do love — and accept it as a normal part of my being."

"I could not have realized the entirety of my being without you embracing all that is you, Jim. You have taught me the logic of the whole." They drifted in the link, sharing without the need for words.

McCoy still stood in the wrecked doorway, watching in wide-eyed amazement as his friends found answers, knowing something profound had occurred. He was totally oblivious to the tears streaming down his face, matching another. He snorted in self-disgust. "A fine doctor I am! I couldn't even diagnose the problem!"

"A fine doctor you are, Leonard," came Spock's soft baritone. "Loving and expressing love have never been issues for you. You love — blatantly and without thought or hesitation — despite your penchant for arguing and fighting with me." A gleam of warmth shone in the dark eyes. "It is your way of expressing affection in a manner you hope is not offensive to me."

Each brother reached out a hand to McCoy, maintaining their own touch and meld. McCoy took each hand readily, happily, basking in the warmth of their caring. Eventually they separated and sat down, each totally comfortable with the others. Spock's face was peaceful and serene, the mask not required. Kirk almost glowed, happy with his new self-discovery; with the reality of the brotherhood. McCoy looked like a cat contemplating canaries for lunch.

"I still have a few questions," McCoy offered, after he had pumped Spock full of vitamins and the first officer was munching a megaprotein salad.

"Only a few, Bones?!" chuckled Kirk.

"Spock, why did you choose to die? What possible disgrace could you have brought to Jim?"

"Humans have a vast array of emotions, Leonard, however, they appear to limit the expression of the gentler emotions in many circumstances, while at the same time giving somewhat shocked approval to the killing of each other. Most illogical. Humans actually seem to fear love. You frequently mistake purely sexual encounters for the real emotion of love, and further, erroneously assume that love must lead to sexual activity." The familiar eyebrow lifted; the dark eyes gazed at the humans with warmth.



"Humans have come a long way with respect to IDIC. Love between two persons of the same gender is now accepted in general society. However, for those in high positions, such as presidents, diplomats and unfortunately, starship captains, the old standards are frequently still applied." Dark eyes captured hazel ones. "To even give the impression that such a relationship exists could mean your destruction as a starship captain." Spock paused momentarily as the waves of their feelings swept through the link, then turned his attention again to McCoy."

"In my visions, Jim was the third image. As my Vulcan self so clearly stated, I have accepted Jim as a part of my being. My feelings would have been so obvious had that image appeared. In his "high visibility" position, Jim would have been ridiculed and disgraced among Humans. It would have destroyed his reputation and his career. I was unwilling to allow that option."

McCoy looked thoughtful, then a sweet smile broke out on his face. "You couldn't have hidden your feelings for Jim even if you'd killed yourself, Spock. 'Cause if you'd killed yourself, you would have proved your feelings just as surely as if Jim's image had appeared." Affection shone on the craggy features, as McCoy continued softly. "The definition of love, at least where I come from, is puttin' someone else's needs or good above your own — even at the cost of your life."

A look of intense thought transformed Spock's features for a few moments. "I believe, Doctor, this provides irrefutable proof of the direct opposition of logic and emotions. I chose the alternative which logically should have provided the most good and the least possible damage, only to find that my choice caused almost as much emotional trauma as the appearance of Jim's image would have." He frowned thoughtfully. "I believe I do not understand the nuances of your more frequently displayed human emotions," Spock said with great innocence.

Kirk chortled with relieved laughter, then managed to gasp, "don't you EVER do anything like that again — don't even think it! My system will takes years to recover!" He touched the link, needing to assure both of them of its reality, experiencing the comfort of Spock's essence.

Warm silence wrapped around them as all three drifted in their thoughts. Finally McCoy softly interjected, "Love isn't logical, Spock, but none of us can live without it in some form or another."

"Actually, Bones," Kirk said in a thoughtful tone, "love is logical." The Vulcan eyebrow soared; the angular features exhibited great interest. "It's the only strength we humans have," he continued " . . . the only means of transcending our selfish little individual microcosms and growing. It is the only relief we have from the emptiness within us. Because only when we love — truly love — without our egos and without that sexual connotation — can we grow beyond the need to fight and kill."

"So you were both fighting the same battle in different ways?" McCoy asked, realization dawning.

Kirk nodded, his eyes focused on something far away. "Yes, though I didn't realize it until moments ago. No emotion, or at least no expression of emotion is acceptable to a Vulcan. And alpha must control, dominate. Alpha can't love, because loving means giving and giving is equated with surrender. It wasn't until I could really see and accept the function of the female aspect of my total being that I could really love . . . and admit . . . and accept . . . love. I tried to block that all after . . ." Kirk swallowed, then continued, " . . . after Genise left. It hurt so bad." He stopped to think and compose himself a moment, then continued.

"Loving, for a Vulcan, causes terrible conflict even when the recipient is lifemate. Is it the emotion itself, or its expression which causes problems?" Kirk looked at Spock for confirmation of his theory.

"To even acknowledge one has such an emotion is to indicate less than adequate control. Vulcan racial fear of the return to violence is so strong within us, most would rather die than admit to any emotion. Yet the conflict comes because logic is the realization of, and dealing with, reality, however painful or however it differs from our desires." Spock looked at both his human friends a moment, dark eyes warm with fondness. "Recognizing and acknowledging what does now and has previously existed is only logical," he pronounced seriously.

Kirk continued, "I couldn't or wouldn't see the purpose and combination of my facets or images till fear for Spock's life forced me to realize and acknowledge that love is part of us all . . . and can't be denied if we are to be complete beings. And sometimes part of loving is pain, like when people grow away from each other. The female influence helped me to understand and accept that."

"What brought you running, Jim? How did you know what was happening with Spock?" The physician figured he already knew the answer, but realized the captain needed to hear himself, needed to work it out completely before he could truly internalize.

Kirk looked at the Vulcan a long time before answering. Then he turned to McCoy. "Bones, I'm not sure I can explain it. I had a short segment of the dream, during which all three of my images were there and so was Spock. But when 'my' images threatened me, Spock turned and walked away. All of a sudden I had this terrible overwhelming sense of loss, like part of me was gone . . . I felt totally alone." He shook his head, blinking back hot tears that formed at the remembered feeling. Warmth touched his mind; caring, steady.

Understanding suddenly blossomed on the open face. "The alpha told me the fight would continue until I learned to integrate and love and acknowledge love for the parts of myself or until I died." Kirk looked hard at Spock, then turned again to face McCoy. "And Spock was there — because he's part of me! And that part of me was dying!"

There were long moments of silent understanding as both men drew comfort from the link, then McCoy, curiosity still unsated, asked, "Spock, why were all your images male? For that matter, why did you have to experience this conflict at all?"

"Because I had succeeded in suppressing, but not actually accepting and dealing with my emotions. My conflict was neither with my female nor my alpha, both of which exist and influence my being, but do not control. The area of my difficulty crossed racial or species lines, and concerned my emotions and my perception of Jim as part of self."

"Well, I for one, am glad to have you all back together." McCoy squeezed the shoulders of both friends.

"As are we, Leonard, as are we."

"Gentlemen," came Kirk's enthusiastic comment, "it's time to go mind the store."

The lift decanted them on a bridge returned to relative normal. The senior command crew, in their familiar forms were staffing stations with typical efficiency, but with an additional warmth,

or sense of camaraderie. One by one they looked at the three, sensing the new energies. Each was invited to join till all were touching and touched. The entire bridge crew felt the warmth, the bond of love that linked them all.

Then came the voice without sound, clearly 'heard' by all aboard. *"You have done well. Remember."*

And the slight vibrations of the engines again throbbed underfoot.

"Yes, Mr. Scott," a grinning Kirk said to the intercom before it quite buzzed.

"... Aye, sir," came the engineer's puzzled voice. "The engines just started by themsel's. No damage."

"It's about time things got back to normal around here," the captain groused faintly. Spock turned to look at him, right eyebrow reaching. Through their link Jim heard a chuckle. *This IS normal, Captain!* Kirk grinned, then looked around the bridge. The rest of the crew was grinning with him.

"Resume course for Shanti. Ahead Warp 4."

"Captain, a message from Starfleet coming in."

"On screen, please."

Admiral Mendez' face was creased by a grin, "Jim, you're outta luck! Your adventure has been cancelled. Communications with Shanti have been restored. It seems they encountered a solar storm with unusual size and properties that passed through their system and simply stopped communication signals. They report no damage. They're smiling more than ever, if that's possible, and talking about 'prema.'

Prema, indeed, thought Spock. Love flowed through the link.



"Their growth is remarkable from our last visit," came a voice.

"There is an awareness of total unity, here. They begin to realize each is a part of the other. Perhaps soon will come the understanding that even the open area they consider space is actually the matrix of the All, and that everything manifesting in this plane, regardless of form, does so against the backdrop of Universal space known as the One."

"This band of beings is almost ready for advanced teachings. Soon they will bond tightly enough to leave this dimension." The warm, inviting thought/concepts came as the gathering of entities dissipated, and NCC 1701 changed course for its new assignment.



OLD HABITS DIE HARD

By CarolMel Ambassador

Maker! He was bored. . . bored, bored, bored.

Dr. Leonard McCoy leaned forward to rest a dejected chin on his upraised hand. The Medical lab around him was quiet, quiet as a morgue. McCoy sighed.

The first month aboard the new Enterprise had been great. A time to recover from their experiences during 20th century earth, becoming familiar with the updated medical laboratories of the ship, physical exams, filling out reports, and just becoming acquainted with the new members of the crew. But now that things were beginning to fall into a normal routine, what was there to do off duty?

Bored, bored, bored.

Years ago if he needed a little entertainment he could go and pick on Spock. But things were different then. Now their friendship had been acknowledged openly and it just did not seem right somehow to treat a true friend that way. Calling him a pointed eared hobgoblin and the like.

McCoy drummed his fingers on his desk, wondering if he should make up a new series of physical exams. He sighed. That idea would not be appreciated much by the crew. He must be getting old and crotchety if he could not think of any means to amuse himself. He would go visit Jim but he knew that Kirk was still heavily involved with the ship's orientation.

Bored, bored, bored. Where was a Vulcan to pick on when you needed one?

The lab door opened and McCoy looked up curiously. Speaking of the devil.

"Oh, hello Spock."

"Good evening, Dr. McCoy. I am here to return your medical tapes." The Vulcan stepped further into the room, turning to McCoy's desk to hand the doctor the diskettes. McCoy took them, grateful that his friend had chosen to return them in person instead of down loading them from the bridge computer. The doctor leaned over to place the tapes in the bottom drawer.

"Thanks Spock." McCoy stood up, stretching a sore back as Spock looked on."

"Tired, Doctor?" The Vulcan queried.

"Just bored," McCoy scrutinized his companion, as physician as well as a friend." You look like you've been keeping busy. Have you been getting enough rest?"

"Enough to serve, Doctor." McCoy shook his head. Should have known he'd get a response like that, blasted Vulcan.

"Yeah, well you're no spring chicken, Spock. You had better take care of yourself." McCoy headed for the nearest medical bed to turn off the monitor.

"Advice from the experienced, Doctor?" McCoy's face jerked around. Now what was that supposed to mean? He let the comment slide, searching instead for some topic of conversation to share with Spock.

"Well I hope we'll get over this milk run, so that maybe we can get down to some heavy exploring."

"The captain reports that he has received new orders. I am confident that we shall be both informed of their contents when necessary."

"Anything new would be great. Some of the crew seem well seasoned — others are still learning the ropes." McCoy rubbed his forehead tiredly. "We need something to entertain the masses. Or maybe something to at least prepare the crew for new experiences."

"There is an experience here on the ship, Doctor, that I am confident have given this crew a detailed experience with how to interact with alien life forms, as well as new and unusual experiences."

"Oh?" McCoy looked over at his friend with open curiosity.

"It is commonly referred to as the physical examination." McCoy's expression hardened, yet he forced a smile. *That's two*, he thought, but still he let the comment slide; though it grated against his nature.

"Well, that's strictly a matter of opinion isn't it?" Then returning to the previous subject, he continued. "I was thinking that if Jim were to sponsor an evening of entertainment, invite members of the crew to participate like we used to do sometimes on the Enterprise — that we could get to know one another better."

That is an excellent suggestion, Doctor." Spock returned, voice serious. McCoy stood straighter, pleased that his idea was so well received.

"Perhaps you could be the star attraction."

McCoy looked at Spock with curiosity. "Oh?"

The Vulcan continued, his face expressionless. "I'm sure a medicine dance would be most appreciated. I could arrange with the commissary to provide the necessary apparel: beads, bone rattles and . . . "

"That does it!" McCoy sputtered. His returning response was immediate. He expounded with great fervor and detail on the status of Spock's ancestry, progeny, biology and mental state. Rehearsing a list of amply descriptive names of the Vulcan and expounding, with relish, a list of a few new names, picked up during the last few years. The words flowed smooth and steady and the doctor was smiling with joy at the length of his vibrant tirade, to eventually come to a most satisfied conclusion.

Then the realization of what he had just done . . . He should not have said . . . ah, but it felt so good to . . . but what about their open acknowledged friendship? But Spock HAD asked for it by . . .

Recognition of the Vulcan's intent suddenly became obvious. It had taken three attempts by Spock to intentionally rile the doctor, until the physician had finally retaliated. McCoy looked at his companion sternly, seeing what could only be best described as a very smug expression on his friend's face.

Maker . . . it was good to be home. McCoy thought, a contented smirk on his face.

The amusement in the Vulcan's eyes mirrored his own.



DILEMMA

"Tell them we have no idea location Enterprise."

I lie back as darkness again descends
Knowing I will not sleep.
My whole career was spent waiting for command and
For three years I have been master of this vessel,
Leading her ably and well,
Content in the sameness of our exploration,
Or so I thought
Until **she** went out on a final mission
And within hours faced more danger
Than I have done in my years of command.
As soon as I heard, I did not want to be here, safe,
I wanted to be with her!
Never before has she faced such danger
Without my sure hand at her helm.
She is not answering for one reason,
They are going against orders
To save their friends,
My friends.
He taught me well and
I find myself reacting in kind,
Going against Starfleet,
Waiting to assist in their return,
For return they must!
The Enterprise cannot go on without him,
They cannot go on without him,
I cannot go on without him.
She knows I am here,
So all I can do is lie and wait,
But wishing with all my heart that
I was with her, with them,
And with him.

Ginna LaCroix

THE GAME OF LIFE

By: Laurie D. Haynes

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The sleek Federation starship, 1701-A imprinted on its hull, warped through space in pursuit of the Klingon marauder. The bird of prey had attacked an unarmed freighter, severely damaging it.

At the science station, Spock plotted the Klingons' probable course. He arched an eyebrow as he recognized the first planet likely to be encountered on that course. "Captain, I believe you'll find this interesting. If we continue on our present course, we will eventually arrive at the planet Gothos."

The captain's eyes widened. Then he closed them tightly and groaned, "Oh God, no. Spock, you don't suppose Trelane is still there after all these years? That's just what we need -- to tangle with that brat again."

"It's difficult to say, Captain. One would think Trelane would have reached adulthood by now, but we really have no idea of the development time or lifespan of his species."

"Mmm. Well, I want that warship. Continue the pursuit. Trelane probably moved to other parts long ago." Kirk exchanged a glance with Spock, who raised his eyebrows and shrugged his shoulders slightly.

Within two hours, both ships were approaching Gothos. Kirk and the bridge crew watched on the viewscreen as the Klingon ship passed by the planet. Suddenly, the warship came to a dead halt, changed course, and took up orbit around the planet.

Perplexed, Kirk rubbed his chin and murmured, "Now what do you suppose that Klingon commander is up to?" He frowned, then ordered, "Mister Sulu, take us into orbit. Uhura, open a hailing frequency to the Klingons."

"Enterprise to Klingon warship. This is Captain James T. Kirk. Surrender your ship or prepare to be destroyed."

The commander of the bird of prey answered with a colorful Federation curse and a burst of phaser fire. The Enterprise's shields flared and held.

"Return fire, Mister Chekov."

Chekov moved to obey. He pressed the phaser touch pad on the control panel in front of him. Nothing happened.

"Now, Mister Chekov."

The Russian tried once again, with the same results. "Sorry, Keptin. Something's wrong. I cannot fire the phasers or the photon torpedoes."

At that moment, out of nowhere, a familiar figure appeared on the bridge.

"Trelane!" shouted Kirk. "What the hell?" He jumped to his feet.

Trelane, dressed as a nineteenth century American cowboy, grinned at Kirk. "Hello, Captain Kirk." Trelane looked him up and down. "You look different. I see you have different uniforms, too. I like them -- very distinguished looking. I must confess, I hardly thought you'd come back to visit me after our last game.

Kirk's eyebrows narrowed and his hands closed into fists. "I see you haven't changed at all. We came for that Klingon ship; not to visit you. Uh, by the way, where are your parents?"

"Oh, they're off on a trip." Trelane pointed. "I got in a lot of trouble because of you. My parents took my planet away from me for fifteen years! You owe me." His expression changed to one of anticipatory pleasure. "I've got a great idea for a game! The Klingon captain can play, too." Trelane abruptly vanished from the bridge. So did Captain Kirk.

Uhura was astonished to hear Spock swear under his breath as he seated himself in the command chair. "Mister Chekov, scan the planet for life signs.

As soon as they appeared on the planet, Kirk launched himself at Trelane, who was standing in front of him. He came up short as Trelane pointed his finger at him, freezing him in position, his fist drawn back to punch Trelane. Out of the corner of his eye, Kirk could see the Klingon commander. Apparently, Trelane wanted to play with him, too. The Klingon was also frozen into place.

Both men glared at Trelane, who laughed heartily.

"Now, here's the game, Captain Kirk, Commander Kalath. I'll be the sheriff and you two will be the outlaws. In a couple of days, when I get tired of playing, I'll let you go. That is, unless I catch you first." He gave his captives his most charming smile. Two posters suddenly appeared in Trelane's hands. He held them up. On the posters, were the images of Kirk and Kalath, and their names. In large letters were the words, "WANTED DEAD OR ALIVE."

Trelane giggled. "I really haven't made up my mind which way I want you two. But of course, I can always have a trial and execute you afterwards. This is going to be such fun -- even

more than we had before, Captain Kirk. Now, I'm going to give you both an honest-to-goodness head start." He waved his arms and teleported Kirk and Kalath to a point miles away.

The two captains looked around them. In the distance were huge rocks and boulders, apparently the foothills of a mountain range. They were standing in the middle of a sandy plain, the only vegetation occasional stands of barrel cactus. Kirk quickly realized that Trelane had provided them with weapons -- six-shooters in holsters buckled around their hips.

Kalath watched Kirk warily as he pulled the revolver from its holster and took aim at a cactus. He pulled the trigger and the gun kicked and spat flame. Kalath followed him over to the cactus, which now had a neat hole in it. "I'll be damned. The gun actually works!" Kirk muttered.

Kalath pulled his own revolver and Kirk jumped back, pointing his pistol at the Klingon. Kalath ignored the human and examined the gun. The Enterprise captain lowered his gun, but did not reholster it for the time being.

Kalath rumbled something in Klingonaase that Kirk recognized as a curse, then switched to Federation standard. "Kirk, you obviously have dealt with this Trelane before. Who is this . . . human?" He pronounced "human" as if he had a bad taste in his mouth.

"He's not human," Kirk replied. "I don't know what species he is, but I would guess that it's a very long-lived one, from what I can tell about the developmental time. He may look like an adult, but he's only a boy, albeit a very dangerous one, and he was a boy when I first met him twenty-three years ago. He's actually some sort of energy being, much like the Organians. This planet is his playground. Everything you see here, he created. He's obsessed with Earth, though apparently he's fixated on a somewhat later time period than the last time I saw him." Kirk took a deep breath and ventured cautiously, "Look, Kalath, I don't want to be here any more than you do. We can fight each other or we can team up and try to beat Trelane."

"Very well, Kirk, but do not attempt treachery. I shall be watching you."

Kirk looked at the Klingon sideways. "The same goes for you."

The two captains set out for the foothills. The sun was bright and hot and there was no breeze. After the first half-mile or so, Kirk removed his heavy red tunic. He pushed up the sleeves of his white undershirt and slung the tunic over his shoulder. From time to time, Kirk and Kalath checked behind them, but they didn't see Trelane.



Aboard the Enterprise, Spock suppressed his frustration and worry. The sensors clearly picked up Klingon and human lifeforms, but the transporter would not function. He himself had attempted to take out a shuttlecraft, but the hangar bay doors would not open. Trelane had very effectively imprisoned them aboard their own ship. Nevertheless, he ordered the monitoring kept up. Every ten minutes, Scotty attempted to use the transporter, just in case Trelane became distracted and relinquished control.



Kalath and Kirk reached the rocks and began climbing. The human was sweating heavily, but the Klingon did not seem bothered by the heat. Kirk pointed to a cliff up ahead, "That ought to be a good temporary stopping point. We should be able to get a clear view of the plain behind us."

The two scaled the cliff of rock and loose soil. Once on top, Kalath walked a short distance away to check the terrain ahead. Kirk turned and put his hand to his forehead, shielding his eyes from the sun, and gazed out over the plain they had crossed. In the distance, he could see a lone figure on foot. The figure was blurry and distorted as Kirk peered through the heat waves rising up off the hot sand. As Kirk stood on the edge of the cliff, the cliff face began to separate. As the human felt it giving way beneath his feet, he whirled and tried to dive away from the edge. He managed to catch the crumbling remaining edge with his fingertips and called out to the Klingon. Kalath immediately turned and saw his erstwhile ally clinging precariously to the cliff face.

Kalath stood for a moment, regarding Kirk and trying to estimate his odds of defeating Trelane on his own. Reaching a decision, the Klingon cautiously stretched out on the cliff and grabbed hold of Kirk's wrists. However, Kirk's skin was sweaty and slippery, and Kalath could not maintain his grasp on the human. The Klingon's eyes squinted with the effort and he bared his teeth sympathetically as Kirk fell to the rocks, several yards below.



Trelane saw the figure go over the cliff and was curious. He immediately teleported to the site. Trelane cocked his head to one side and regarded Kirk with interest. Blood trickled from Kirk's ears and mouth and his left arm was twisted at an unnatural angle. The arm was coated in red as the bone protruded through the skin. Despite this, Trelane realized, the captain was still breathing -- faintly.

Up on the cliff, the Klingon, convinced that Kirk's fall was Trelane's doing, and fearing for his own safety, drew his pistol and took aim at the "boy." Trelane glanced up at the Klingon and nonchalantly waved his hand at Kalath and froze him in position.

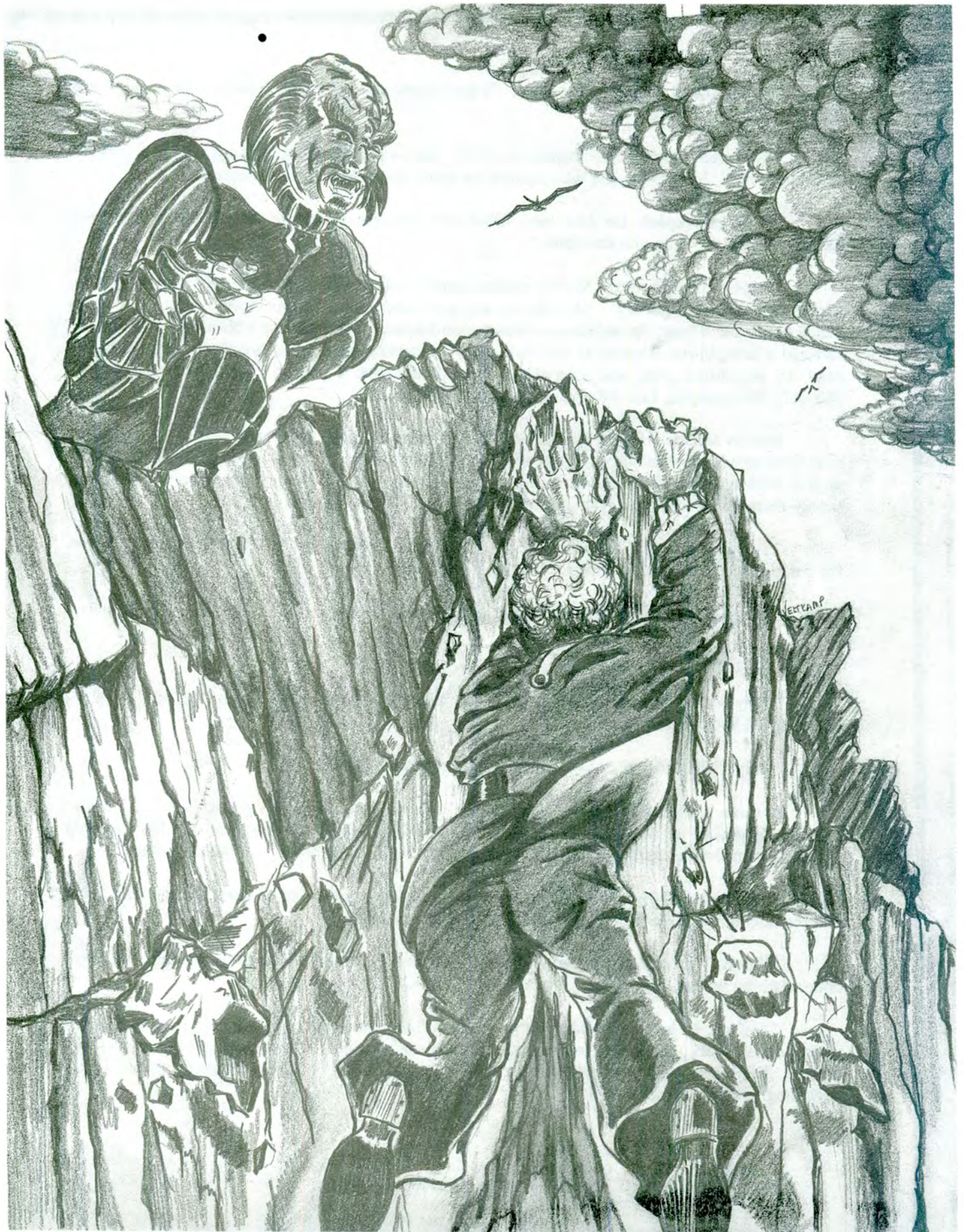
"Damn you, Captain Kirk," Trelane said. "We've hardly started, and already you've messed up my game." He thought for a moment. "I guess we'll have to get you fixed." He snapped his fingers and the two of them transported to the bridge of the Enterprise.

Spock blinked in surprise as Kirk and Trelane appeared in front of him. The Vulcan suddenly felt a chill as he took one look at the bloody form of his captain, lying so very still on the deck. He immediately issued an order to Uhura, staring in horror at Kirk, her hands pressed to her mouth.

"Get Doctor McCoy and a medical team up here on the double," demanded the first officer. Spock knelt beside Kirk and checked for a pulse. He was relieved to find one, though it was weak and uneven. He considered carrying the captain to sickbay himself, but realized the possible danger in moving him.

McCoy and the medical team arrived quickly. Trelane moved out of the way to let the doctor examine Kirk. As McCoy passed his medi-scanner over the captain, Trelane spoke up. "He broke. I want him fixed. The game's not finished, yet."

McCoy glared at Trelane and snapped, "You're responsible for this. Why don't you fix him?"



Trelane stared guiltily at the floor. "I don't know how. Besides it wasn't me who did this. It . . . it was an accident."

The doctor returned his attention to Kirk. As he read the results of his scan, he retorted, "Accident, hell! You're the one who created the entire scenario, you little bastard."

Spock interrupted, his dark eyes filled with concern, which he did not try to hide from McCoy. "Doctor? Can you save him?"

"I don't know, Spock," McCoy replied gently, rising to his feet as the techs carefully lifted Kirk onto a null-grav gurney. "His injuries are quite extensive -- he has three broken ribs, one of which punctured a lung. In addition to a compound fracture of the arm, he's bleeding internally and suffered a compressed fracture of the skull which is causing intracranial bleeding." He shook his head, his expression grim, and ordered the techs to take Kirk to surgery. "The odds aren't good. The only thing keeping him alive, now, is sheer stubbornness."

McCoy left the bridge with Kirk and the med-techs as Spock turned to Trelane. The Vulcan's eyes sparked with unusual anger, but he retained his composure. "We are not toys, Trelane, for you to play with and then discard when we no longer amuse you. Have you not learned anything in twenty-three years? Do you even understand what death is -- what pain is?"

Trelane looked as if he wanted to cry. "I'll make it up to you! Watch!" He closed his eyes for a moment and clenched his fists. "I'll destroy the Klingons for you."

Spock lunged at the youngster and grabbed him by both arms.

"No! Don't!"

"Why not? You were going to kill them, anyway. I heard Captain Kirk say so." Trelane looked up at Spock defiantly.

"Only if they forced us to, Trelane. We are not murderers."

Trelane regarded the Vulcan quizzically, not understanding. "Very well, I shall return Commander Kalath to his ship. However . . ." Trelane waved his hand and the Klingon ship vanished from the Enterprise's sensor screens. "I've sent them far away. I didn't kill them."

The Vulcan nodded in relief, but before he could say anything, a deep disembodied voice reverberated through the bridge. "Trelane! What have you done?"

"Uh-oh," whispered the boy. "I'm in for it, now." More loudly, he responded, "I haven't done anything wrong, Father."

"Trelane, we have repeatedly told you to leave other beings alone. You have gone too far this time! Mister Spock, we apologize once again for our son's actions. We regret that your captain was injured. We have not, unfortunately, been able to impress upon Trelane the sanctity of life. I am beginning to think we never will."

Spock thought for a moment, then said, "I have a suggestion. Strip Trelane of his powers and let him travel with us for a while in human form. We will return him here in two months, unless circumstances prevent it."

"That is a wonderful idea. We will permit it. He will be a human for two months and will face the same dangers you undoubtedly face each day."

"It is somewhat risky, but I feel the risk is warranted." Spock did not mention that he was concerned more about the risk to themselves, rather than Trelane.

"We agree. Goodbye, Trelane. We will see you in two months. Behave, and learn this lesson well."

"But I don't want to!" Trelane pleaded, tears streaming down his face. "Please don't make me."

His parents did not reply.

"Mister Sulu, take us out of orbit," Spock commanded. "Uhura, contact Starfleet and inform them of what has transpired. Mister Sulu, you have the con. I'll be in sickbay if you need me."

"Aye, sir."

The Vulcan took Trelane firmly by the arm. The boy snapped his fingers. When nothing happened, he cried even more loudly.

"Silence!" Spock ordered him. "You are coming with me. You're going to start out as an engineering assistant."

"Ow! Let go of me!" Trelane complained, sniffing, as Spock escorted him from the bridge. "What's an engineering assistant?"

"You will soon find out."



Spock dropped the boy off in engineering and explained his plan to Scotty. The chief engineer grinned and rubbed his hands in anticipation of the chores he intended to assign Trelane.



The Vulcan waited in McCoy's office, pacing impatiently. Four hours later, the doctor appeared, his surgical scrubs stained with Kirk's blood. "I've done all I can for now," he told Spock wearily. "I almost lost him twice on the table. He'd lost a lot of blood and the damage was extensive."

"Will he live?"

"I don't know, Spock," McCoy replied, seeing his own worry mirrored in the dark Vulcan eyes. "He has a chance, and he's a fighter. He doesn't give up easily, you know that."

Spock nodded. "May I see him?"

"Yeah, come with me. I don't want to be away from him very long."

Spock stood beside Kirk's bed as McCoy checked the overhead monitors. All the indicators were at very low levels. The Vulcan worriedly watched his friend as he slept. The captain's pallor was pronounced and his breathing shallow. A respirator mask covered his mouth and nose, and his left arm and chest were encased in plasticast. A cap of the same material covered his sandy hair.

Spock and McCoy sat for a long time watching their friend. After nearly two hours had past, the silence was broken by a moan. McCoy immediately noted Kirk's elevated temperature and heart rate.

"Damn! Stay with him, Spock, I'll be right back with a hypo."

Kirk was muttering, now, and tossing his head back and forth on the pillow. "Ship . . . in danger . . . must . . . stop . . . No!"

Spock reached out and put his hand on his friend's arm. "Jim, the ship is safe. **You** are safe."

Kirk did not seem to hear him and kept muttering. The Vulcan hesitated for a moment then placed his fingers on the captain's face. He reached out with a soothing mind touch, purposefully avoiding the deep meld, which he felt was not needed. *Jim, you must rest. The ship is safe, everything is going to be all right. Rest, my friend, and heal. I am here.*

The captain fell silent and was still. Spock glanced up at the overhead monitor. Kirk's heart rate was returning to normal, though he still had a fever.

"Ahem," McCoy cleared his throat. Spock glanced briefly over his shoulder at the doctor and moved aside. McCoy injected Kirk with an antifebrin. Soon, the captain's temperature dropped to a more acceptable level. "Thanks, Spock. I guess that's basically what he needed -- to know someone was here."

"And that the ship was no longer in danger," Spock added.

The two of them sat down on either side of Kirk and resumed their vigil. When several more hours had passed and Kirk's condition had improved significantly, McCoy ordered Spock to his quarters. "Go on and get some rest; Jim's going to be okay."

McCoy didn't miss the slight relaxing of tension in Spock's posture.

The Vulcan studied Kirk's readings, then asked, "You won't leave him alone?"

"I'm staying right here and the nurses have already fixed up my couch for the night. Go on. I'll call you if there's any change."

"Very well. I do have a great deal of work to do." Spock stood and wrapped his fingers around Kirk's wrist to feel for himself the life that still beat there. Satisfied, he turned and left sickbay.



Scott issued Trelane an instruction manual on the nuclear generator cells, as well as a tool kit, and instructed him to help Ensign Kevin Riley, Jr. break down and reassemble each of the cells. Trelane regarded the manual and tools with complete confusion and started complaining. "You can't make me do this! Why, when I get my powers back, I'll show you a thing or two."

"Ah, but there's the rub, isn't it, lad? Ye don't have your powers, do ye? An' I believe that's the point of this little experiment -- for ye to learn what it's like to be human. Mister Riley, I want you to check behind the lad an' make sure he does the job right."

Trelane's face screwed in and he started to retort, but the scowl on Scotty's face made him change his mind. Instead the youth glared at Scott, sighed, opened the manual, and began reading. Riley took him in tow and they left Scotty's office for the nuclear generator cells.



Three days later, to McCoy's relief, Jim Kirk finally awoke. As the captain's eyes focused on the doctor, bending over him, he fumbled with the respirator mask and removed it.

"Welcome back, Jim," said the beaming McCoy. "Surprised to still be here?"

A corner of Kirk's mouth lifted in a grin and he nodded weakly.

"Trelane found you and brought you back. Get this: he said you were 'broken' and wanted me to fix you." McCoy snorted.

"He . . . let us go?"

"Not exactly. His parents did."

"Ah, yes. I was . . . hoping . . . they'd . . . turn up."

"That's enough talking for now, Jim. You just take it easy and rest."

Kirk sighed.

At that moment, Trelane walked into sickbay, a look of extreme agony on his face. He entered Kirk's room in search of McCoy.

As soon as he saw Trelane, Kirk immediately sat upright in the bed. The movement cost him dearly. He cried out and sank back onto the pillows. McCoy spun around and was furious to see the boy standing behind him. Trelane held up his finger, which was bleeding from a slight cut. "I'm injured!" he sobbed.

Kirk's good hand tightened convulsively on the covers in both pain and anger. When he could speak again, he gasped, "What the . . . devil's . . . going on here?"

"Trelane, get out. Wait outside and don't come back in here again," McCoy snapped.

A hurt look on his face, the boy obeyed.

The doctor turned back to Kirk, who looked questioningly at him. "It's okay, Jim, his parents stripped him of his powers. He's staying with us for a couple of months to learn something about life." McCoy smiled. "It was Spock's idea."

"Spock?" echoed Kirk incredulously. The doctor nodded. "Get him down here."

McCoy left the room and called the first officer. He examined Trelane's finger and sealed the tiny cut. "Next time, don't waste my time with something like this, Trelane. This is absolutely ridiculous."

"It is? Well, how should I know? I never bled before."

McCoy shook his head in disbelief. Spock arrived and raised an eyebrow at the sight of Trelane. "Mister Trelane, I believe your station is engineering, not sickbay."

"Yes, Mister Spock," the boy grumbled, and stormed out.

The Vulcan went to Kirk. Looking him over, he remarked. "I'm pleased to see you looking so much better, Captain."

"Thanks," mumbled Kirk. "Why Trelane?"

Spock cleared his throat. "I take it you mean why is Trelane aboard the Enterprise?"

Kirk gave him a look of exasperation.

"Yes, well, his parents were at a loss as to how to get him to respect the rights of other lifeforms. I feared this sort of incident would continue to happen unless he did learn. Therefore I suggested that he spend two months with us as a normal human."

"Trelane . . . is hardly . . . normal."

"Granted, but he is devoid of powers."

Kirk nodded wearily. "Just hope . . . don't . . . regret." He closed his eyes and drifted off.

"It will be all right, Jim," replied Spock softly, gently gripping the captain's shoulder. Seeing his friend was asleep, he turned and left the room.



By the time Trelane got to his sixth nuclear generator cell, he was disgusted and weary. When he finished, he found he had left out a coupling. *Damn!* he thought, glaring at the offending part. *I'm not about to take this thing apart again. Nobody will ever know the difference. They never use these cells anyway.* Trelane pocketed the small coupling. Riley walked up to him.

"You all finished, Trelane?"

Trelane stood up and nodded.

Riley gave the cells Trelane had worked on a cursory glance. "You put everything back together like the manual said?"

Trelane hesitated a fraction of a second, then nodded again.

"Okay, then, Mister Scott wants us to check in with him. Hopefully, he'll pat us on the back and tell us to get some rest."

Riley and Trelane went to Scott's office.

"Are ye all finished, then?"

"Yes, Mister Scott," replied Riley. "It was a long hard job, but we finally got them checked out and reassembled."

"I expect ye learned something, then."

Trelane nodded. "I now know more about nuclear generators than I ever knew." He cocked his head and thought for a minute. "But then I didn't know anything about them to begin with."

Scott chuckled. "V'erra well, then, lads. Get some rest. In three days ye'll help me change out a dilithium crystal." The engineer noticed Riley and Trelane exchanging mournful looks. "Ah, I can see I've got your interest. 'Tis indeed a fascinatin' procedure. All right lads, that's all for now. Take tomorrow off."

Once out of earshot of Scotty's office, Trelane groaned and complained to Riley, "This isn't fair! Installing dilithium crystals sounds worse than dismantling nuclear generator cells. I'm so tired from reassembling those cells, I could sleep for a week."

Riley yawned sympathetically. "I know what you mean. It does seem like we're being singled out for punishment. All I did was manage to get caught necking with a yeoman in an engineering storage closet. It's not like I hurt anybody." He looked at Trelane meaningfully.

"Captain Kirk's injuries were the result of an accident, not my doing."

"Yeah, sure," replied Riley sarcastically. He scratched his head and thought for a moment. "Y'know, I sure would like to get even with Mister Scott."

"Yes, it would be very satisfying," agreed Trelane. "If I had my powers, I could just banish him from existence, or strand him on a planet."

"Whoa, easy, boy!" Riley chuckled. "That's a bit extreme, don't you think?"

"It is?"

"Yeah. I've got a great idea. Scotty has this still, see . . ."

"A still what?" asked Trelane, confused.

"A distillery, Trelane. It's used to distill alcohol. Okay, listen up." Riley detailed his plan.

The next morning, Scotty went to his still to check on the latest batch of his beloved engine room hooch. His eyes widened in horror as he saw, instead of a beautiful amber liquid flowing through the tubes, a green slime coursing through his most prized possession. He sputtered and his face turned red as he shouted for his assistant.

The assistant cringed when she saw Scotty's still. Heads were going to roll.

"Ach! I'll never get it clean." Scotty moaned. He was almost in tears. "The poor darlin' will have to be destroyed." He turned to the assistant. "Find the culprit responsible for this. Immediately!"

After a short investigation, the assistant discovered that Riley and Trelane had been seen in the area the night before. The crewman who had spotted them said they had been acting very strange, giggling and such. Scotty's assistant passed the information along to the chief, who called the two young men on the carpet.

"All right, lads, 'fess up and it'll go easier on ye. Did ye or did ye not sabotage ma still?"

The culprits stood in Scotty's office, carefully studying the floor.

"Out with it!" Scott ordered, beginning to lose patience.

Trelane and Riley looked at one another, then suddenly, each pointed at the other. "It was his idea!" they both exclaimed. They were silent for a moment, staring at each other incredulously, before bursting out laughing.

Scott was not amused. "All right, lads, ye can forget about any time off for the next month. Your assignment is to scrub down the engine room from top to bottom."

"But that'll take years!" Riley complained. Trelane said nothing, afraid of getting himself into more trouble by opening his mouth.

"Best you get started then." The two pranksters turned and left the office. Scott grumbled to himself then smiled. A day or two of scrubbing the engine room and the lads would no doubt have learned their lesson -- a Scotsman's still was sacred and not to be mistreated.

The Engineering A shift came on duty the next morning and found both Riley and Trelane hard at work scrubbing down the engine room deck. Scott had finally let them quit at 10:00 the previous night, but had ordered them to be back on the job at 6:00 A.M.

They scrubbed all day until their knees and backs were aching and their hands were raw. Riley passed the time boasting to Trelane of his amorous conquests. Trelane was fascinated but thoroughly confused about the current mating customs. His studies of Earth had indicated nothing like Riley's tales.

At the end of the day, Scott finally took pity on the young men after inspecting their handiwork. "All right, lads, that'll do. Since ye have worked so hard, I'm still going to let ye assist

me tomorrow with the dilithium crystals." Scotty clapped each of them on the shoulder. "I trust there'll be no further incidents?"

"No, sir!" Trelane and Riley replied emphatically.

"Verra well, then, report to me at 0900."

"Yes, sir," they agreed, trying to inject unfelt enthusiasm into their voices. Riley and Trelane gave a collective sigh as Scott walked away.

The following morning, Scott, Riley, Trelane, and two other engineering assistants prepared to change out the crystals.

Scott first called the bridge. "Mister Spock, we're going to switch power over to the nuclear generator cells while we change out the cracked dilithium crystal. I'll have to ask you to come out of warp drive and use impulse power till we're finished."

"Understood, Mister Scott. We're powering down, now." When Sulu indicated they were on impulse drive, Spock informed Scott.

Scott operated the necessary controls, and switched power to the nuclear generator cells. Shortly after he did so, his board lit up, indicating a systems failure in one of the cells. The chief engineer frowned mightily and turned to Riley. "You lads reassembled those cells. Go check out #6 and let me know what the problem is."

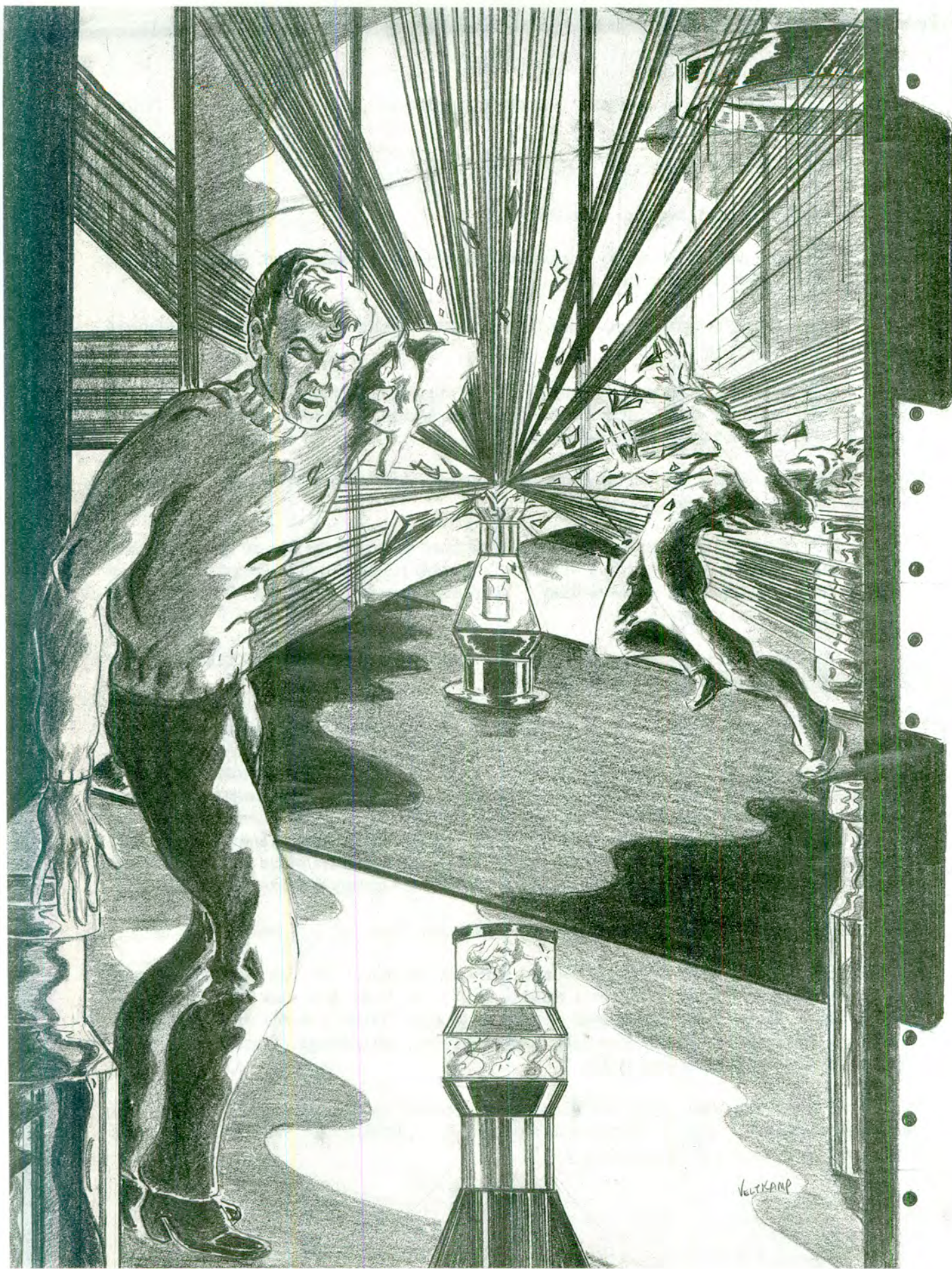
"Aye, sir." Riley's eyes flickered to Trelane, who refused to meet his gaze. Riley shook his head and proceeded to the nuclear generator room.

The young ensign removed the cover to cell #6. As he did so, the cell exploded in his face. The force of the blast threw him across the room. He landed hard, then was still. Alarms sounded throughout the ship and radiation shields lowered into place. Scott and his assistants ran for the generator room. They looked through the radiation shield and saw Riley's motionless form. Scott called for an emergency medical team. The med team arrived and two of them donned rad suits and entered the contaminated area to rescue the injured ensign. They brought him out and turned him over to the rest of the team after a quick decontamination. Trelane watched the whole procedure without a word. He watched the med techs load his only friend onto the gurney and take him away.

After the techs had left, Trelane managed to stammer, "Is-is he . . . dead?"

Scott, his face and voice full of sadness, answered the boy. "No, but even if he lives, I suspect his career is finished. He took a radiation blast in the face. I've seen accidents like this before. I'm no doctor, but I doubt seriously he'll ever see again. Damn! I should've checked behind you lads to make sure the job was done right. Riley knew those cells, though. I must have made the lad strip them down a dozen times before."

He turned to Trelane and studied him carefully. The boy could not look him in the eye. "Did you work on that cell, Trelane?" Trelane didn't answer. "Aye, I thought so. Well, lad, we all make mistakes. Mine was not checking behind you."



Trelane reached into his pocket and brought out the coupling he was still carrying around. He had not been able to figure out a way to dispose of it without being caught. Still refusing to meet Scott's gaze, he handed it to the engineer.

Scott was furious. "Ye mean ye deliberately sabotaged the cell?!"

The boy looked up then. "No! I didn't mean to leave it out."

"But ye knew, didn't ye?"

Trelane looked away and nodded. "I . . . I didn't think it would matter. I was too tired from all the work to put it back."

"Trelane, ye're just as responsible for hurting Kevin Riley as if ye'd done it on purpose. Will ye never learn?"

A single tear trickled down the boy's cheek. "Mister Scott, could I go see about Kevin?"

"On one condition, lad. If he lives, you must tell him what you did."

"But he'll hate me! He won't want to be my friend any more!"

Scott put a hand on the boy's shoulder and replied gently, "If ye're a true friend, ye'll tell him the truth."

It was the following day before McCoy permitted Trelane to see Riley. The young ensign was suffering from radiation poisoning, which was already responding well to treatment, but he was completely blind. A bandage covered his eyes.

Trelane moved to his bedside. "Kevin?" he whispered. Riley turned his head slightly toward the noise.

"Who is it? Is someone there?"

"It's me, Trelane. I've come to see how you're doing."

Riley's voice was bitter. "It could be worse, they tell me. I could be dead." He laughed, but there was no warmth in it. "That's what they think. I'd rather be dead than be blind for the rest of my life."

McCoy, standing in the doorway, spoke up. "Now, Riley, don't talk like that. It so happens there are several scientists working on visual prostheses."

"Yeah?" Riley replied hopefully.

"Yeah. I'm not going to lie to you, Kevin. Even if the prosthesis works, it won't be the same."

"Anything's better than this unending darkness, Doctor McCoy. Will I be able to stay with Starfleet?"

"Perhaps in some capacity or another, but not on a starship."

"Oh." The young man's disappointment filled the air.

"Doctor McCoy," Trelane asked, "could I speak to Riley alone, please?"

The doctor hesitated, then nodded. "Okay, but just for a minute. When you get through, the captain wants to talk to you."

Trelane nodded his understanding. Once the doctor had left, he sat down beside the bed and gripped his hands tightly together. He could not seem to get out the words Scott had made him promise to say. Riley saved him the trouble.

"I think I already know what you want to talk about, Trelane. I haven't forgotten who worked on the #6 generator cell. Just answer me one thing. Did you do it on purpose?"

"No. I didn't mean to cause any harm."

Riley swallowed hard. "I'm permanently blind because you screwed up, Trelane. Don't ever forget that. I'll never forget it was my responsibility to check behind you. Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to get some rest."

"All right," Trelane replied, dejected, and got up to leave.

"Oh, Trelane, do you think you could come back and see me later? Maybe you could bring me some of those racy book tapes from my cabin."

Trelane perked up. "You don't hate me?"

"Naw. I'm mad as hell at you, but it was as much my fault as it was yours. Hey, how about getting Leah Randolph to come with you and read those tapes?" Riley started laughing and Trelane joined in.

The smile left Trelane's face when he walked into Captain Kirk's room. The captain was sitting up in bed and had a stern look on his face. Spock, sitting in a chair beside the bed, wore an equally somber expression.

"Mister Trelane, Mister Scott told me what happened," said Kirk, his voice soft, but the intonation as hard as the glint in Kirk's eyes. "Because of your actions, a promising young officer was nearly killed, and in all likelihood will never see again. Furthermore, you put the entire ship in jeopardy. What have you got to say for yourself?"

Trelane studied the floor. "It wasn't deliberate, sir. It was an accident."

"An **accident**!?" Kirk replied, almost shouting. "You knowingly left out a critical part of the generator and you call the explosion an **accident**?"

Spock put a hand on Kirk's arm to calm him, then said, "Mister Trelane, one of the things you are here to learn is to take responsibility for your actions. Apparently you still haven't learned that."

Trelane grew angry and retorted, "Don't you think I know it's my fault Kevin got hurt?! I didn't want him to be hurt -- Kevin is my friend."

"You're being insubordinate, Mister Trelane," Kirk admonished. "It would appear you do have some guilt feelings in the matter -- frankly, I wondered if you felt anything." Kirk thought for a moment, then spoke again. "The rest of the crew is going on shore leave tomorrow when we arrive at Starbase 7 to drop off Ensign Riley. You will remain confined to your quarters to dwell on the serious consequences of your actions. There will be no further such incidents, do I make myself clear? You will follow orders and do the tasks assigned you properly. That's all, Mister. You're dismissed."

"Aye, sir," Trelane replied tterly, his eyes flashing. He spun around and left the room.

Kirk turned to Spock, and sighed wearily, his arm holding his sore ribs. "I don't know, Spock. I just don't know."

Spock helped his captain to lie down. "I believe he may be learning, Jim. He seems truly upset that he caused Riley's injury."

"I guess."



A week after the captain's original injury, McCoy began to allow Kirk to make periodic trips to the bridge. Kirk, however, would retreat to sickbay only when McCoy and Spock insisted.

Two days later, the Enterprise pulled into orbit around Calunus III, for a routine planetary survey. Despite Spock's protests, Kirk included himself in the landing party.

"Captain," the Vulcan argued, "Doctor McCoy has not actually released you for duty, yet. I do not think he would approve of you participating in a landing party."

Kirk's eyes flashed with annoyance as he turned to Spock. "I'm fine, Mister Spock. A stroll and some fresh planet air will do me good. McCoy doesn't need to know about this." He glared at the Vulcan meaningfully.

"Very well, Captain," Spock replied, inwardly sighing.

"I think landing party duty would be good for Trelane. Include him."



When McCoy found out Kirk had beamed down to the planet, he swore in three languages and headed for the transporter room.



The landing party split up into groups of two to explore the area. Spock was amazed when Kirk invited Trelane to accompany him. The Vulcan said nothing, however, to indicate either his surprise or his disapproval. Trelane was enthralled with the idea of being a member of the landing

party. They were in a warm glade in a forest and the dual suns loomed high in the pink sky. The youth ran from plant to plant, analyzing them with the tricorder. Kirk followed along more slowly, amused at Trelane's fascination with the beautiful flora. The captain had warned him at the beginning about touching the plants or inhaling the scent of the flowers without first running the tricorder on them.

Trelane strayed out of sight and the captain shouted at him to return. The boy reappeared momentarily. In his arms was a small animal, which looked to Kirk like a cross between a bear and a wolf. Trelane's eyes gleamed with excitement and he smiled broadly as he approached Kirk.

"Look what I found, Captain! Can I keep it? Its fur is wonderfully soft and it makes a pleasing noise."

Kirk sighed and shook his head. "No, Trelane, put it down. If it's a cub, its mother may be around here someplace."

The boy reluctantly put the animal down, but knelt beside it, defiantly stroking it. Before Kirk could order him to get away from it, a much larger version of the animal roared and sprang from some nearby brush, landing upon Trelane. The boy threw up an arm to ward off the creature's fangs, and the wolf-bear's jaws closed savagely on the arm. Trelane screamed as Kirk, phaser now in hand, searched the ground for a stone or branch to throw at the beast. He had to get it away from Trelane before he fired the phaser.

The captain found a large rock and hurled it at the wolf-bear. The animal turned loose of Trelane's arm, growled, and turned to Kirk. As soon as it was out of contact with the boy, the captain fired a stun charge at the beast. It had no effect. Kirk had time for only one more shot before it was upon him. The creature merely shook its head and pounced upon Kirk, knocking him hard to the ground. Dots danced before the captain's eyes for a moment and he felt sharp pain in his chest and gut, but he grabbed the wolf-bear by the throat. He took the only chance he had and maneuvered the phaser still in his hand so that it was pointed at the animal's head. Kirk pulled the trigger and both he and the wolf-bear went limp from the shared phaser stun.

Trelane stumbled to his feet and over to Kirk, unconscious beneath the beast. It was conscious, but dazed. Using his uninjured arm, the boy managed to shove the wolf-bear off the captain. Taking the phaser from Kirk's hand, he put another stun charge into the animal, knocking it out. He called Spock on the communicator, and sat down beside the captain to wait.

Within two minutes, Spock arrived, an angry McCoy beside him, ready to give Kirk a piece of his mind. As soon as the doctor saw Trelane and Kirk, his anger was replaced by concern. He pulled out his medi-kit and started to apply a pressure bandage to the boy's arm. Trelane insisted he was all right and begged McCoy to help the captain first. McCoy quickly caught Spock's eye, as if to say, "Now how about that?!" Spock nodded to himself in approval. The boy was indeed learning.

After bandaging Trelane's arm, the doctor ran his scanner over Kirk. "Phaser stun -- Trelane, did you shoot that thing while it was on the captain?"

Trelane shook his head. "He did it himself. It was the only thing he could do."

McCoy nodded and read the rest of the scanner results. "Damn!"

"What is it, Doctor?" Spock quickly asked, disturbed by the expression on McCoy's face.

"He refractured a couple of ribs, and worse, he busted loose some of the internal seals I made. He's bleeding internally again. Call Scotty and beam us directly to sickbay."



The next day, Spock, Trelane, and McCoy visited Kirk, confined to bed. Not for the first time, the doctor scolded his patient. "What the hell did you think you were doing, anyway, traipsing off on a landing party?"

"Just wanted a little fresh air, Bones."

"Hmph! Next time you pull a stunt like that, I'm reporting you. Is that understood?"

"Perfectly," replied Kirk, grinning.

Trelane spoke up. "Captain, I'm sorry you were hurt -- it's all my fault. If you hadn't been trying to keep that thing from eating me, it wouldn't have attacked you. Why did you risk your life to help me especially after everything I've done?"

"You're a part of my crew, Trelane, my responsibility. I couldn't stand by and let that beast kill you. Now, while it's true you share some blame in this, it's also true you meant no harm. And McCoy tells me you dragged the animal off me and knocked it out. You saved my life by doing so. You've come a long way, Trelane. Your parents would be proud."

The boy's eyes lit up. "You really think so? I don't believe I've ever done anything to make them proud of me."

"Okay," McCoy declared, "visiting hours are over. You two clear out of here and let him get some rest."

Kirk opened his mouth to protest, but McCoy pointed a finger at him and said, "Don't even think about complaining, Jim, you're in enough hot water with me as it is. Furthermore, you're staying right here for the next ten days, so get used to it."

The captain shut his mouth and exhaled heavily. He gave the doctor a dirty look as McCoy injected him with a sedative.

Kirk's eyes closed as the drug took effect and McCoy, Spock, and Trelane filed out of the room.



The rest of Trelane's two months were almost without incident -- save for the time he made a pass at a female officer.

"But I don't understand, Captain. Riley said when you want a woman, you go after her. I wanted Lieutenant Jansen."

Kirk buried his face in his hands and leaned his elbows on his desk. He looked back up at Trelane. "I don't think grabbing Lieutenant Jansen in the corridor and kissing her was quite what Riley meant. Just because you want something, doesn't mean you can have it."

"I guess that's why she slapped me."

Kirk nodded and launched into a lecture on the right way to treat a woman and how to woo her. He later assumed he had gotten through to the young man when he saw him escorting Lieutenant Jansen to a crew party in the rec room.



By the time the two months were over, Kirk had promoted Trelane to bridge duty and the boy navigated them back to Gothos. The captain and his first officer beamed down to the planet with Trelane. The boy's parents were awaiting him. They took the forms of a human man and woman, the man dark, the woman blonde. They inspected their son closely.

"You seem different, Trelane," commented his mother tentatively. "More self-assured. More . . . mature."

Kirk told of Trelane's work aboard the starship and how the boy had saved his life. Trelane interrupted at this point and told them the complete story of the wolf-bear, not leaving out his shortcomings in the matter.

Trelane's father clapped his hand proudly on his son's shoulder. "Two months ago, Trelane, you could never have admitted doing anything wrong. Thank you, Captain Kirk, Mister Spock, for what you have done for our son."

"We merely provided the setting and some guidance. He achieved the majority of this on his own."

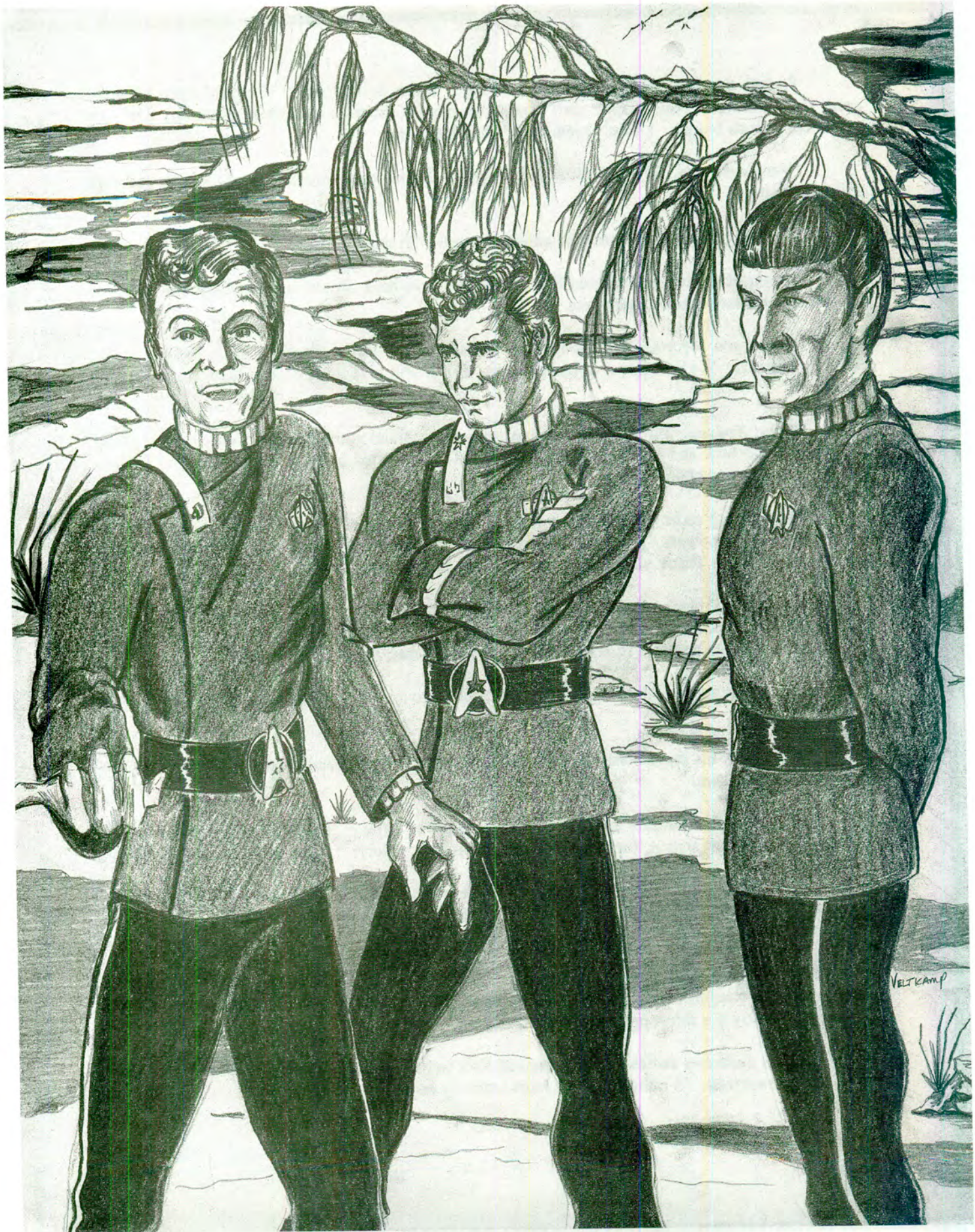
Trelane shrugged, then said. "Captain, thank you for letting me travel aboard the Enterprise. I'm truly sorry for all the trouble I've caused in the past. I understand, now, that what I did was wrong." He looked down at the ground, then back at Kirk and asked haltingly. "Do you think . . . just maybe . . . they would let me into Starfleet Academy?"

Kirk was not entirely surprised by the question. He had not failed to notice the intense interest the boy had taken lately in his work aboard the Enterprise.

"Well, Trelane, I think you'd make a good candidate -- without your powers, of course. You'd have to take a series of tests, but I'd be willing to recommend you, if your parents agree."

Trelane turned to his mother and father. "Please let me. The last two months have been the most meaningful of my life."

His father considered. "I suppose so, Trelane, but understand, you would have to give up your powers. I don't think you could keep from using them unwisely at this point in time. Also, you should know that you will age more rapidly in this form, although your lifespan would still be much greater than that of a normal Human."



Trelane thought carefully before answering. "I can do it, Father. I've had them all these years and I was never really happy until I spent two months aboard a starship as a human. And I've never had friends before. I didn't even know what they were."

"Very well, son. We will allow you to apply. If they deny you admission, you must accept their decision."

"I'll study hard. I will pass the admission tests," Trelane swore.

"If you like, Trelane," offered Kirk, "you can come back aboard and we'll arrange transport for you to the nearest examination site."

"Thank you for your invitation, Captain, but I would like my parents to come with me to Earth for the test. We will travel in our own way and it will give me a chance to spend some time with them."

"Okay, Trelane. I'll pass along my recommendation and notify Starfleet that you'll be going to Earth. Good luck and let me hear from you." Kirk extended his hand to the boy and Trelane grasped it firmly and shook it.

The aspiring cadet gave Spock a Vulcan salute. "I hated you at first, Mister Spock, for making me lose my powers. I'm grateful to you, now. I understand, now, that life is not a game and people are not toys. Thank you, Mister Spock. Live long and prosper."

"Goodbye, Trelane. We expect to hear good things from you in the future," the first officer replied. In truth, Spock couldn't help wondering if Trelane would be able to stay out of trouble, but he returned the salute and said to both Trelane and his parents, "Live long and prosper."

The captain opened his communicator and spoke into it. "Two to beam up, Scotty, from these coordinates."

Trelane and his parents watched the two Enterprise officers dematerialize as the transporter beam locked onto them.

On the bridge, Kirk gave the command to leave orbit. After ordering Uhura to notify Starfleet of Trelane's imminent arrival, the captain mused to his first officer, "Think he'll make it, Spock?"

"It's quite possible, Jim. He's bright and determined, although stubborn." Kirk didn't miss the twinkle in his first officer's eyes, as Spock added, "It would not surprise me if he ended up commanding a starship."

"Oh, really?" Kirk looked dubious. A thought occurred to him and he looked back up at Spock. "Well, I wouldn't trade this job for any other, but . . ." he grinned, "somebody should tell him it's not exactly the safest profession in the galaxy."

Spock's eyebrows twitched and he looked Kirk in the eye for a moment before directing his gaze to the viewscreen. "I rather think he knows that by now."

TRAVELERS RETURN

By Ginna LaCroix

Art by Chris Soto

*But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscover'd country from whose bourn
No traveler returns, puzzles the will,
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of?
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all;
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pith and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry,
And lose the name of action.*

Hamlet, Act III, Scene 1

James Kirk felt pain tear at his heart as he stood on the bridge looking at his first officer — his best friend — as he was being hurt possibly more than he had ever been before in his life. Spock had been betrayed by someone he had trusted, and there was no way the Vulcan could hide the anger and hurt that he was now feeling.

Kirk himself had just added to that pain. He knew how much Spock abhorred the mind link; knew how much his own privacy and the privacy of others meant to him, yet Kirk had to know how much Valeris knew. He had to know where and when the next assassination attempt was going to take place and, above all, he had to know who the other conspirators were.

So he had asked Spock for a great sacrifice, and it had only taken a glance, and a word. Spock had not looked at him — could not look at him. They both knew it was necessary, and neither could face the other's pain.

What they did not learn from Valeris, Sulu had supplied and Chekov was already computing the course required to take them to Khitomer. As Sulu's image faded from the screen, Kirk straightened a little, noting that he was feeling more sore than ever from his fight back on the penal asteroid Rura Penthe. Having to fight the Martia-creature on top of the lizard-like alien was something he would not like to try again. He had not realized his own punch packed such a wallop! Kirk turned his attention to Valeris and found his anger returning. She had hurt Spock. If she had known Kirk better, he knew she would have thought twice before she would have betrayed the Vulcan, and then flaunted that betrayal in Kirk's presence. Now it was imperative that she be held in a safe place where she would have no chance to warn her fellow conspirators, and there was only one such place on the Enterprise. "Security," he said quietly, but his tone was one of controlled anger, "you will escort the lieutenant to the brig, and she will remain there under guard until I order her release." He could not look at Spock as he spoke, knowing the wound was just being opened further. A Vulcan who could not be trusted . . . what greater pain could there be?

"Aye, sir," said a young officer as he stepped forward. Kirk recognized Lt. Commander Noren, a competent officer who had served under him some years earlier during that awful mission when Sybok had been killed. Noren reached out and took hold of Valeris' arm, and Kirk could see it was taking all of Spock's will power not to jerk him away.

Kirk waited until Noren and Valeris had left the bridge, then he took a deep breath. "Chekov, how long before we reach our destination?"

"Approximately four hours, sir."

Kirk nodded. "You have the con then, Mr. Chekov. Work with Scotty and get all possible speed out of her." He looked over at Spock. "We're heading into a lot of trouble, and I think we should take a break while we can." His voice was full of sympathy as he looked at the Vulcan's haggard face. "I doubt if we will encounter trouble before we get to Khitomer, but when we do, things are going to get rough."

Spock returned Kirk's look with stricken eyes, then nodded and turned without a word. The turbolift doors shut behind him, leaving Kirk aching to be with him, but knowing that it was too soon, that anything he said now would be wrong.

"Jim . . .

Kirk turned at the sound of McCoy's voice and a slight smile touched his face. "Do I look as bad as you do?" he asked.

"Probably," McCoy answered gruffly. "Come on, you and I are going down to sickbay and make sure we haven't picked up any bugs from that pleasure planet we got banished to . . ." He saw Kirk hesitate. "Hey, Chekov is in charge, and your first instinct is right, now is not the time."

Kirk nodded, even while feeling a little surprised at how astute McCoy always was. The doctor knew how concerned Kirk was about Spock, and he obviously felt the same, yet he also understood now was not the time to push. "All right, Bones, for once I agree with you." Their eyes met, and McCoy knew Kirk was not talking about himself.





Sickbay was silent when they walked in, and most of the lights were dimmed. Kirk looked around, amusement showing on his face. "Bones, I don't think that in all the years I've known you, I've ever seen this place empty before!"

"That's because so far we've managed not to get the Enterprise into a fist fight with someone who's out to kill you." He glanced up as he activated the lights. "I have a sinking feeling that this peace isn't going to last very long."

"No, I'm afraid it isn't," Kirk agreed, absently rubbing his shoulder.

"Where are you hurting?" McCoy asked as he watched Kirk trying to ease his right shoulder into a more comfortable position.

Kirk looked over at him, "Everywhere," he admitted. "It's been a long time since I've been beaten up like that. Somehow the old body doesn't feel much like bouncing back."

"Hum," McCoy said as he turned and started to search for a scanner. "I hate it when everything's this neat," he muttered. "I don't know where most things are supposed to be stored, so when they're there, I can never find them."

Kirk wandered around the sickbay while McCoy continued his grumbling search. He was worried about Spock, and worried about what they would find, or not find, when they arrived at Khitomer. He had a feeling of certainty that it would be Chang he would be facing in the cloaked Bird of Prey, and the Klingon was a deadly adversary whose reputation Kirk knew well, although he had never met Chang face to face in battle as he was sure he was about to now. Fighting a known enemy was one thing, but fighting an experienced foe who also had a cloaking device was an entirely different situation, and it was going to take every bit of guile Kirk had to come out the victor. And he must be victorious, for the alternative was too dreadful to contemplate.

"You looking for a guided tour or something?" came McCoy's voice from behind him. "You haven't been admitted into this little state-of-the-art world of mine since our last refitting, have you? Matter of fact, I don't think you've been past my office!"

Kirk grinned as he turned around. "Must be a record for me," he said as he eyed the instruments in McCoy's hand, "You look ready for full scale surgery."

"You just admitted that you had been used as a punching bag, Jim-boy, and that you were feeling the effects. None of us is any younger, and a beating like the one you received from that lizard-thing was mighty impressive."

"Hey, it's not like I lost that fight!" Kirk protested.

"Yeah, sure, you're just lucky that thing had knees," McCoy shot back, causing Kirk to flush as he remembered those were his own words. "Kick any man there and you're sure to come out the victor, at least until the other fella can get back on his feet, which I doubt to this moment that your opponent has managed. Come on, let me check you over."

Kirk walked across the room and got onto one of the diagnostic beds, wincing a little as his shoulder came into contact with the firm surface, a movement that did not escape McCoy's notice.

McCoy switched on the panel and watched as the arrows rose and fell, then he carefully ran a scanner over Kirk. Neither one of them spoke, leaving only the quiet whir and soft beeps to disturb the silence.

"You've got a mildly separated shoulder," McCoy said finally, "and some very impressive bruising, along with a couple of frostbitten toes which you probably haven't even noticed yet."

"I remember how cold my feet were," Kirk replied.

McCoy shuddered. "It wasn't only my feet," he said. "I don't remember **ever** being that cold, not even when Spock and I were marooned on that planet with Zarabeth and I almost froze to death." He shook his head. "I hope I never see snow again as long as I live!" He switched off the panel. "Okay, you can sit up now, and I'd like you to strip to the waist so I can repair the damage to that shoulder." He noted a shiver go through Kirk. "Are you that cold?"

Kirk shook his head. "I don't think so. I was just having a flashback to how miserable it was on that damned asteroid. Must have been a sympathetic reaction or something." He undid his jacket and painfully shrugged out of it, then tried to pull off his shirt, but his shoulder protested loud and clear, causing a slight grunt of pain to escape him.

"Here, let me help with that," McCoy said as he reached out and carefully pulled the shirt off over Kirk's head. He stepped back and looked at the dark bruises that covered Kirk's upper body. "That alien obviously had the strength that went with his size," he noted. "You were lucky to be wearing those bulky furs to ward off the worst of the impact, or you'd be in a hell of a lot worse shape than you are now." He pulled an instrument out of its container and gently put a hand on Kirk's injured shoulder, his sensitive fingers tracing the swelling. "You could have complained a little, you know," he said as he assessed the damage in the surest way he knew, by a trained physician's feel.

"It didn't start hurting until just before we left the bridge," Kirk protested.

"You mean not until after Spock had left," McCoy countered.

Kirk sat in silence for a time as McCoy started the probe running over the torn muscle fibers and stretched ligaments. "Bones, I'm really worried about him."

"You have reason to be," McCoy said quietly as he concentrated on the delicate work. "He blames himself for what happened."

Kirk thought about that for a moment, then he shook his head. "Not only that. Do you remember what he said on the bridge?"

McCoy glanced up for a moment. "Not particularly. What was it that caught your attention?"

"Something he said to Valeris. It was almost as if he had blocked the rest of us out, he said something I had never heard him say openly to anyone, not in that way."

The probe McCoy was using suddenly stopped, causing Kirk to look at the doctor, noting that the expression on McCoy's face was more serious than usual. "Exactly what did he say?" McCoy asked.

Kirk looked down at his hands again. "It was when Valeris was telling Spock that she had tried to warn him about what was going on. He suddenly looked so strange, as though something had suddenly occurred to him. Then he answered . . ." Kirk's voice grew very soft and McCoy had to strain to hear him. ". . . 'Neither of us was hearing very well that night, Lieutenant. There were things I tried to tell you . . . about faith . . .'" Kirk fell silent for a time, then he looked back up at McCoy, "Spock was that open in front of some of the crew he doesn't even know, Bones, I know he believes in the concept of faith because of things that he has said and done in the past, but it has always been a private, unspoken belief. He . . . he hasn't referred to anything like that since T'Lar performed the fal tor pan . . . since before we lost him. . . ." Kirk's voice died away, and his worried eyes held McCoy's.

McCoy returned Kirk's gaze for a few moments, then he turned the probe back on, and started to work on Kirk's shoulder again. "We know Spock well enough by now to realize that faith is a large part of his make-up, but it probably wouldn't be with the average Vulcan. It's no wonder they were speaking at cross-purposes, Jim. Valeris appears to me very much like Spock was when we first knew him — cold, logical, no sense of humor, no ability to accept anything that isn't by the book. . . ." He ran his fingers over Kirk's shoulder again, then laid the probe down. "That will be a little sore for a couple of days while the ligaments recover from being stretched out of shape." He looked at Kirk for a moment, then shook his head. "I agree with you that it is unusual to hear Spock talk openly about anything that deals with emotion. I also agree with you that he is really hurting at the moment, but he needs a little time to himself. I know the sack cloth and ashes bit is necessary to help him come to terms with his actions, so I'd give him a little more time. Why don't you go cleaned up, maybe take a quick nap, then go and see him?"

Kirk slowly got down off the table and picked up his shirt. "I guess he does need the time," he agreed reluctantly.

"Don't bother putting that back on," McCoy suggested. "You don't live far from here, and it's still going to be painful moving that shoulder any further than you have to."

Kirk looked at McCoy. "How about you?" he asked, suddenly realizing that his worry had all been for Spock to the detriment of the man who had gone through the same hell as he had. "Are you all right?"

"Well, I'm glad you finally asked," McCoy answered jokingly. "I'm in better shape than you, to hazard a guess. A little frostbite in the fingers and toes, and I think I've lost a month's sleep, but for somebody who thought he was facing his first Kobayashi Maru test a few hours ago, I feel pretty good."

Kirk's answering smile was a little bleak. "Don't get your hopes up that that was our real test, Bones. We've still got a peace conference that is likely to get sabotaged if we don't get there first."

"You always know how to boost morale, Captain," McCoy said soberly. "Go on, get out of here and let this physician heal himself before the next casualties arrive."

McCoy stood looking at the closed door long after Kirk had left. He knew the seriousness of the situation they faced, and was not naive enough to think that they were not going to meet the Klingon bird of prey and end up in one hell of a fight, a fight that would probably cause loss of life on both sides. He knew that Kirk was fit enough to lead that fight, but he was worried about Kirk's

preoccupation with Spock. The Vulcan had been hurt, badly, and McCoy understood that when Spock hurt, Kirk bled, and that was stress which Kirk did not need at the moment.



Kirk had meant to have a long talk with Spock, but exhaustion took him to a deep, dreamless sleep, only to be awakened by Chekov's warning summons that they would arrive at Khitomer in thirty minutes. As Kirk dragged himself out of bed, he decided that he felt worse than he had before he took a nap, but as he looked at himself in the mirror, he discovered that he looked quite normal. The stubble had been shaved, and the dark shadows under his eyes were not as noticeable as they had been a couple of hours earlier.

He dressed hurriedly, hoping to at least catch Spock in his quarters before going to the bridge. The Vulcan was there and, as McCoy predicted, had wrapped himself in sack cloth and ashes, still bitterly denouncing his actions. Kirk wanted to take Spock by the shoulders and shake some sense into him, but there was no time. He did the best he could to boost Spock's morale, but they were approaching Khitomer fast, and removing guilt was going to have to wait till later. However, when he extended his hand, Spock took it. At least it was a start.



The applause of the many races gathered at the peace conference gradually died down, and Kirk found himself feeling a little foolish standing on the podium with the rest of his crew gathered around him. He looked for Spock and saw him standing a little off to one side, his eyes fixed on Lt. Valeris. *Time to get him out of here*, Kirk thought. *I'm sure that Admiral Smillie can take care of Valeris and her co-conspirators.* He stepped down and walked over to where Smillie was talking to the head of security.

Smillie put an acknowledging hand on Kirk's arm as he finished his discussion then, as the security man walked away, he turned to Kirk. "I wasn't wrong back at Starfleet Headquarters, Captain. You were the right man for the job."

"You knew about the conspiracy?" Kirk asked. "You could have. . . ."

Smillie shook his head. "No, Captain, I had no idea that anything like this was going to happen." He looked at Kirk for a long moment. "What I meant was that there is a person in this galaxy that all our adversaries both admire and fear — one person whom I personally admire, and that man is you, sir." He was quiet for a moment, then he looked at Kirk. "I'm sorry you had to go through that ridiculous and dangerous trial, Captain, and I'm damned glad you managed to escape from the alien's graveyard and get here in time to prevent this." He stared at Kirk for a minute, then smiled slightly. "I take it that you are aware that what you did was impossible. No one escapes from Rura Penthe."

Kirk flushed a little, causing Smillie's grin to widen. "Well, Admiral," he began, "I don't quite know what to say. . . ."

"Say, nothing, Captain, you've merely proved that you are respected by a large number of people, and what you have just accomplished has just added to that respect. Also, you have shown

the Klingons that their dreaded penal colony isn't as escape-proof as they have boasted that it was. Now, we seem to have most of the conspirators here by the looks of it. Do you know of any others?"

"General Chang. . . ." Kirk started.

"Gorkon's chief of staff?" Smillie said in astonishment. "Damn, we'd better send people. . . ."

"That will not be necessary, Admiral," came Spock's voice from beside Kirk. "General Chang attacked the Enterprise on our approach to Khitomer." He looked at Kirk, then back at the admiral. "General Chang is no longer a threat," he added softly.

Kirk glanced over at the Vulcan. Spock's eyes still looked haunted, but he had seen Kirk and Smillie together and had immediately come to give Kirk whatever assistance he required.

Smillie looked from one man to the other, then his attention went back to Kirk. "I believe I said something about the Klingons thinking twice before attacking the Enterprise under your command, Captain. It appears I was wrong."

Kirk shook his head. "He was desperate, Admiral, as were the others. The idea of peace terrified them, as it terrified me. Gorkon said something to me that is only now starting to make sense, and it makes it easier to understand why these people acted as they did."

"What was that?" Smillie asked, intrigued.

A far-away expression crossed Kirk's face as the image of the Klingon chancellor appeared in his mind. Finally he spoke, his voice quiet but with a note of respect in it that Spock vividly remembered had been sorely lacking during Kirk's original meeting with the Klingon chancellor. "Gorkon told me that if there is to be a brave new world, our generation is going to have the hardest time living in it." Kirk was silent for a few moments, then he looked back at Smillie. "It is difficult to accept life-long enemies as sudden allies. I would not allow myself to see Gorkon's vision, Admiral. I was too righteous in my own definition of what should be." He smiled slightly and glanced over at Spock. "My first officer, as usual, has brought me to my senses." He took a deep breath, then turned his attention back to Smillie. "I assume we can leave matters in your hands now, Admiral? I believe we have once again done our bit for king and country."

Spock found himself stifling a smile. When Kirk had flung that line at him a few days earlier, it had been done in anger, and in obvious resignation that his career was, indeed, over. This time it had been said lightly, almost jokingly, by a man who was obviously far from giving up his life and his ship merely because regulations required it. There were going to be some interesting days ahead as Kirk and Starfleet Command met head to head, and Spock could see that Admiral Smillie was blissfully unaware of the impending battle.

"You can rest assured that these people will be properly taken care of," Smillie said grimly. "You are free to leave, Captain."

Kirk looked at Smillie thoughtfully, wondering if he should open a subject that had always bothered him, then decided that there would never be a better time. "Bill," he started, a slight smile on his face, "we've known each other for a long time, although maybe not well. Perhaps it is time you stopped being so formal around me."

Smillie looked at Kirk for a long time, then he shook his head. "I don't know that I can," he answered honestly. "You've been a legend in Starfleet from the time I was graduating from the Academy and you were taking over your first command. Time has done nothing to diminish your reputation," he added soberly, "and one tends to be formal in the presence of a legend, Captain." He bowed his head slightly, then turned and walked away.

Spock noted Kirk's stunned expression, and leaned forward so his voice would not be overheard by others who were standing nearby. "The definition of a legend is a story popularly regarded as a myth. I would not take what Admiral Smillie just said to heart, Captain, as it would prove that you do not exist."

Kirk did not look at Spock, but the Vulcan saw the smile that touched the corners of his mouth. "You sure know how to deflate an ego, don't you?" he commented as he got out his communicator. "Kirk to Enterprise, prepare to beam up landing party." He looked around the large and noisy room, then finally decided to be undignified. "Hey, anyone who's returning to the Enterprise had better gather quickly, or you're going to be left behind!" The last thing he saw as the transporter beam caught them was Spock's eyebrow raised in a mixture of disapproval and amusement.



The sound of Kirk's voice giving his final course direction still hung in the air as the Enterprise started to leave orbit, and Khitomer. McCoy suddenly realized that only the command crew were on the bridge, and wondered where everyone else was. The bridge was usually bustling with activity. However his curiosity about Kirk's last order got the best of him, so he stepped down to the navigation console where Chekov was busily computing a course. "Just as a matter of interest," he said in a low voice, "exactly where is it that we're heading?"

Chekov glanced up at him. "You heard the captain, Doctor. We're going to NeverNeverLand to join up with Petar Pan."

McCoy stared at him. "Petar Pan?" he echoed.

Chekov smiled. "Surely you've heard the Russian story of. . . ."

"Never mind," McCoy said, holding up a hand. "I'm sure it's the same as the version I know." He turned around to look at Kirk who was sitting in the command chair with a self-satisfied smile on his face. "Second star to the right and straight on till morning, huh? I take it we're not going to make a beeline back to headquarters as per instructions?"

Kirk looked at him. "What will be, will be, Doctor." He got up and looked around. "Shouldn't there be more people around here?" he asked. He turned to Uhura. "Put a call in for the troops, Commander. Let them know they're going to be considered AWOL if they're not to duty stations in five minutes."

"Awol, Captain?" Spock echoed. "I do not believe I am familiar with that term."

"A Vulcan wouldn't be," McCoy answered. "They wouldn't think it was a logical action."

Spock's face darkened, and McCoy immediately regretted what he had just said. "Well," he added quickly to cover up his gaffe, "it seems to me that some of us are overdue for a meal and some sleep." He looked pointedly at Kirk.

Kirk nodded. "To be truthful, I've lost track of what time it is, or what duty shift is on at the moment."

"I believe that's why the bridge is empty, Captain," Uhura said from her station. "We are well into third shift, and the support personnel are in auxiliary control. Most of rest of the crew have probably gone to bed by now."

Kirk frowned. "I'm more out of it than I thought. I take it you didn't send out my order."

Uhura smiled as she shook her head. "It was close, but then I looked at the chronometer and suddenly realized what time it was."

"Time does fly when you're having fun," McCoy commented to no one in particular.

"Thank you, Commander," Kirk said with a grateful smile. "The crew would really think I was getting senile if I ordered them out to stations in the middle of the night for no good reason." He looked around. "Well, I guess that means we're all off duty as well, so I think everybody should go and get some sleep. Heaven knows we deserve it."

The others nodded agreement and secured their stations. As Chekov started past Kirk, the captain put a hand on his shoulder. "Just where are we headed, Pavel?"

"To NeverNeverLand to join the Lost Boys, Captain. Isn't that what you ordered?" Chekov asked innocently, then he smiled slightly. "I'd rather go there than where Mr. Spock suggested."

"I was not suggesting that we go to hell, Mr. Chekov," Spock said mildly.

"No, sir," Chekov answered with a grin, "but Starfleet might not be adverse to it if we continue to ignore them."

"Well, we'll worry about that later," Kirk said. "Perhaps before that happens, you might break down and tell us or them where it is we're going," he added, looking pointedly at Chekov.

"Maybe," Chekov answered, knowing full well that Kirk only had to ask the computer what their destination was, but grateful that the captain was playing along with the joke. "Well, good night, everybody." He looked at Scotty and Uhura. "You want to eat first?" he asked hopefully. They agreed, and with cheery salutations the three of them left for the mess hall.

As the turbolift doors closed behind them, Kirk sat down again in the command chair. "You know, part of me wants to know what course that devious Russian has set, yet. . . ."

"Yet you don't want to go back to headquarters until you're good and ready," McCoy finished for him, "and I agree," he added, meeting Kirk's grateful expression. "I doubt that they're going to do anything to us if we manage to disappear for a few days. After all, they owe us."

"Owe us, Doctor?" Spock asked.

"Yes, damnit, they do," McCoy said, his anger suddenly rising. "How many other ships and crews keep pulling the Federation out of the fire? Hell, we're heroes, and you can't trash a hero!"

"I believe the definition of a hero is a man of superhuman qualities favored by the gods," Spock said drily. "I do not think that anyone on this ship qualifies."

"Oh, yeah?" McCoy countered. "Well, you're not the only one who knows definitions off the top of his head. A hero is also a man admired for his achievements, and I challenge you to prove there is anyone aboard who doesn't fit into that category!"

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," Kirk broke in, "this is not a very rational argument. I think we should allow Chekov to have his fun, and let the ship go where she will for a few hours. It's not going to hurt anything and I, for one, would like to get some sleep without anybody on my back about something. Besides," he added, looking at Spock, "there are some things that need to be cleared up, and we can do it better out here, away from Starfleet."

Spock met his gaze steadily but did not answer. Kirk knew what the Vulcan was thinking but, like Spock, he found he could not get it out in the open. Not yet.

"Well," McCoy said, "I'd better get down to sickbay. We managed to put a few holes in this ship that weren't there when we left spacedock, the kind of holes that usually bring casualties. I was altering torpedoes when I should have been putting people back together. . . ."

Kirk quickly got to his feet. "I got so caught up in all the congratulations for stopping Chang and the next assassination, I've neglected checking the ship!" He looked at Spock. "We'd better go and make sure that the damage control teams were able to keep up with the repairs."

"Agreed," Spock said, "However, the fact that we are standing here breathing recycled air tells us that the gravity and life support systems are still in order, and the hull must have at least been patched sufficiently to keep the atmosphere in."

"One of those blasted torpedoes compromised the hull," McCoy reminded them, a little irritated that the ship always appeared to be their first concern. "Casualties usually come with that sort of damage."

"I'll meet you in sickbay as soon as I can, Bones," Kirk promised solemnly. "Come on, Spock, we're going to start in auxiliary control and find out how the repairs are progressing, then we're touring this entire vessel." He hesitated a minute, then shook his head. "I thought that for once I was going to be able to bring her back to headquarters in one piece, and I almost made it. Damn Chang anyway! The Enterprise deserves better."

"Well, Jim-boy," McCoy said sympathetically, "look at it this way. At least you're taking the ship home in the condition Starfleet is used to seeing your vessels. You're not going to surprise them any."

"Very funny, Bones," Kirk retorted, but the half-smile on his face took the sting out of his words, "Come on, we've got work to do!"



Two hours had passed before Kirk walked into the sickbay. The ship had been heavily damaged in their fight with Chang, and it had taken him a long time to visually assess the immediate necessary repair work. However, the damage control teams had been doing an excellent job, and the ship was serviceable.

McCoy met him at the doorway to his office. "You look beat," the doctor said sympathetically.

"I'm beyond that," Kirk replied. He looked around. "How are things going here?"

"Lots of injuries as you know," McCoy said quietly. "The worst of the blast from that one torpedo went through the mess hall and the kitchens."

"Deaths?" Kirk asked, not wanting to know.

McCoy could not stop the smile. "None."

"None?" Kirk echoed in disbelief.

"There is a space of about half an hour when those areas are deserted, and damned if Chang didn't choose that time to attack. There are a lot of broken bones, some burns, and a good many people aren't going to feel in top shape for a while, but they're all going to make it, Captain. We pulled this one off!"

Kirk found himself smiling back. "You've got a good department here, Doctor," he said.

"You'd better believe it," McCoy answered firmly. "Now, just so you'll believe me, let me show you around, then you and I are going to go and find something to eat." He suddenly realized that Kirk was alone. "Where's Spock?" he asked.

"He's down in engineering helping Scotty. I thought things might be easier for him if he stayed busy."

"You're probably right," McCoy agreed. "Well, come on, let's do a quick once through, then get out of here."

"Ever the dedicated doctor," Kirk teased as they started off.

"One more smart comment like that, and you'll find yourself admitted for the duration," McCoy threatened, knowing that was the perfect response to keep Kirk toeing the line.

Kirk and McCoy got their food and sat down by themselves in the deserted officer's mess. McCoy took a sip of coffee, then looked around. "I'll never forget the last meal we had here with the Klingons," he said as he put the mug back on his tray.

Kirk glanced up at him, the turkey on his fork stopping in mid-air. "We made a lot of mistakes that night, Bones."

"Honest ones, Jim. Don't forget that."

Kirk nodded silently as he chewed his turkey. "Honesty won't bring Gorkon back," he said eventually, "and he was possibly the only man who could bring this coalition together."

"Oh, I don't know, Azetbur seems pretty capable from what I've seen of her." McCoy looked up when Kirk did not respond. "What is it? Do you think that Gorkon could have done a better job because he was a male?"

Kirk shrugged. "Old ideas do die hard," he admitted. "Plus we have no idea how much experience Azetbur has at this sort of thing."

"Gorkon thought enough of her to bring her to the initial peace conference," McCoy countered. "Come on, Jim, you've dealt with female rulers throughout the galaxy, as well as within Starfleet and our own Federation! Why does Azetbur bother you so much now?"

Kirk looked a little uncomfortable, but his eyes met McCoy's. "I guess because the thought of making peace with the Klingons is such a big step, Bones. The female rulers we came in contact with were already leaders of their people; they already had the power. Remember, we've tangled with Klingons for years, and in all that time never once has one of their commanders been female. That should tell you something about their society."

"What about Mara and Vixis?" McCoy asked.

Kirk looked blank.

"Mara," McCoy repeated. "She was Kang's wife, and his science officer. Vixis was Klaa's first officer. . . ."

"That's my point, Bones, two women out of all the officers we've faced in the Klingon Fleet, and they were not commanding officers. Look, when we were on trial on Kronos, Azetbur was the only female present among how many men? The Klingons are a violent warrior race. How long can she keep control of them? How is she going to be able to press her will on so many who want war?"

McCoy sat silent for a time, then he shrugged. "There were a lot of Klingons at that peace conference too, remember? Not all of them were loyal to Chang. Jim, there comes a time when the fighting has to stop. . . ."

"And that is when you need a strong leader," Kirk repeated stubbornly. "We are moving into dangerous times, Bones."

McCoy stared at Kirk, a sudden understanding dawning. He hesitated for a minute, then decided it was best brought out in the open. "Times that we aren't going to be a part of if we step down. Isn't that what's bothering you the most about all of this, Jim, that we were instrumental in saving the peace conference but now others are going to take over?" He looked at Kirk with a serious expression, "This isn't just about Azetbur, or the fact that she's a woman. It's that she's going to be there, and you're not, How many times have I heard you say you wanted nothing to do with diplomacy, and that's what it's going to be from now on as far as the Klingons are concerned." He grinned as something hit him, "I remember you telling Admiral Smillie that a diplomat was better suited to the mission he was sending us on than we were. His smile faded. "I somehow doubt that a diplomat would have fared too well if he'd been subjected to what we went through."

Kirk took another mouthful of food, thinking about what McCoy had just said. "Could that be the reason I feel this way?" he wondered aloud. "We've managed to be in the thick of things for so long, to have a bearing on the outcome of the future of the Federation and Starfleet." He finally looked at McCoy. "Maybe I am feeling left out, Bones," he admitted. "Maybe it's true I'm a little jealous that things are going to happen that I'm not going to be a part of."

McCoy looked at him. "There's a way to alter that," he said quietly but smiling inwardly, knowing it was the perfect way to shake Kirk out of the mood he was in. "The diplomatic corp would take you in a second."

Kirk grinned. "I'm not that desperate — at least I don't think so. Besides, we haven't given up our ship yet. We might still have some life left in us. Remember what Bill Smillie said — there was only one ship and one commander Starfleet felt could be sent on such a mission."

McCoy regarded him thoughtfully. "That's so," he said finally, "but we aren't always going to be here, Jim. Life does end for all of us at some point. Maturity is what allows us to let go gracefully."

Kirk took a sip of coffee before he answered. "You implying I'm not mature, Doctor?" he asked suspiciously.

McCoy grinned. "Who, me?" he asked innocently, then he shook his head. "No, actually, I'm not implying anything like that. I'm just suggesting it's something that you should mull around a little. We're at a big crossroads in our lives. . . ."

"Don't say that, Bones," Kirk interrupted. "We've faced change before, and we've always managed to deal with it badly." His eyes held McCoy's steadily.

"Touche," McCoy said, remembering especially how the ending to their first five year mission so many years ago had backfired in their faces. Hopefully they had managed to learn something from previous experiences, and they were not doomed to repeat those same mistakes. *Maybe we're not meant to step down*, he thought to himself. *Some people are born to die with their boots on, and somehow we've managed not to . . . yet. . . .*

Kirk finished his coffee, then turned his attention to McCoy again. "I was frightened back on Rura Penthe," he said, suddenly changing the subject.

McCoy stared at him in surprise. "Sure could have fooled me," he said. "I would have said angry, maybe, but not frightened."

Kirk shook his head. "I was worried about you, about what could happen to you if I should get killed."

"Someday I'm going to see you frightened for yourself, Captain," McCoy answered. "Do you realize that possibly no other commander in the Fleet would put himself in a position where he would probably be killed?"

"I didn't exactly put myself. . . ."

"Oh, yes you did, Captain, don't give me that. I seem to remember Spock saying that he should go because he was responsible for getting the ship and us into that mess in the first place. I believe that you were the one who refused to let him go."

"I should have refused you permission as well," Kirk said softly. "I should have known there was going to be some sort of set-up." He looked at McCoy. "I'm sorry you had to go through that, Bones."

"As if I was going to let you go charging off onto that Klingon ship by yourself," McCoy countered. "You know damned well you can't function without me, Jim-boy. Didn't I beam down with you onto Regula One? That venture wasn't any less risky. For all I knew you were going to beam me out of existence! Between the two, I'd rather end up in a Klingon penal colony."

Kirk smiled slightly. "Well, if it makes you feel any better, it was nice not to face that ordeal alone. I'm just glad it ended up like it did."

"Well, you know what Spock's like when he thinks his commanding officer is in trouble. His actions become a little rash, to say the least."

Kirk nodded. "He certainly rarely puts himself first." He fell silent for a few minutes, then he looked at McCoy. "What's going to happen to him, Bones? It has taken so many years for him to learn to trust others, to allow himself to be the kind of man that he is, and now this had to happen. Damn Valeris! If I do nothing else in this lifetime, I want to sit on the board at her trial."

"I think you'd be considered a hostile judge," McCoy said mildly.

"I don't give a damn," Kirk said angrily. "Does she have any idea what she did to Spock? Does she even care? She took everything from him that he was willing to give, and then she did this! Spock is the most loyal person I've ever known! It's been a joy over the years to watch him open up and start to trust. I'm really worried that because of her actions, he'll retreat back into that shell again. It took so long for him not to be afraid."

"I know," McCoy agreed, "and that's why it's important to get to him as soon as we can. Talking can be a great therapy."

"If we can get him to talk," Kirk said soberly. He ran a hand over the tight muscles in the back of his neck. "Well, I guess there's nothing we can do about it now. Scotty says he's going to be up all night repairing the shields, and Spock is going to be working with him, so tonight is out."

"Probably just as well," McCoy said. "We're both exhausted. I doubt if we would be any good to anyone in this condition. Let's hit the sack. If we haven't arrived at NeverNeverLand by tomorrow morning, maybe we can do something about Spock then."

Kirk grinned as he remembered what Chekov had done. "I'm of a mind just to let the ship go until she gets to her destination. I'd really like to see where his course takes us."

"Well, why not?" McCoy said. "The only thing Starfleet can do is send out a ship to tow us home, and they're not very likely to do that. Why don't we just let her go?"

"It is tempting, isn't it?" Kirk said. "Well, we just might, Doctor. We'll see what comes along." He got to his feet and picked up his tray. "I hope I never see Klingon food again," he said, remembering the pile of grossly inedible food that the galley had prepared for their dinner that fateful night. Klingon favorites, he had been told later. He looked at McCoy. "Do I have any bright blue foodstuffs on my diet?"

"None that I can remember," McCoy said, "but if there are, I'll be sure to eliminate them, no matter how good they might be for you."

"Thanks, I'd appreciate that," Kirk said fervently.

Shoving their trays into the service bay, the two men walked out of the mess in companionable silence as only two men can who had faced death together, and lived. They had shared something that no one else could share with them, a bond that would be theirs for life. They knew they did not need to speak of it, and probably never would. It was just something that existed in the kind of world they had lived in for so long, where one person's life depended so much on the actions of another. It was a bond few men would ever know, and it was one they had known for a lifetime.

Spock walked alone down the deserted corridor, the haunted expression still on his face. He had tried to keep himself busy, tried to keep his mind occupied in order to banish thoughts he did not want to intrude on his work, but he had been unsuccessful. Eventually Scotty had noticed his preoccupation, and Spock knew he had better leave before the engineer started to pry.

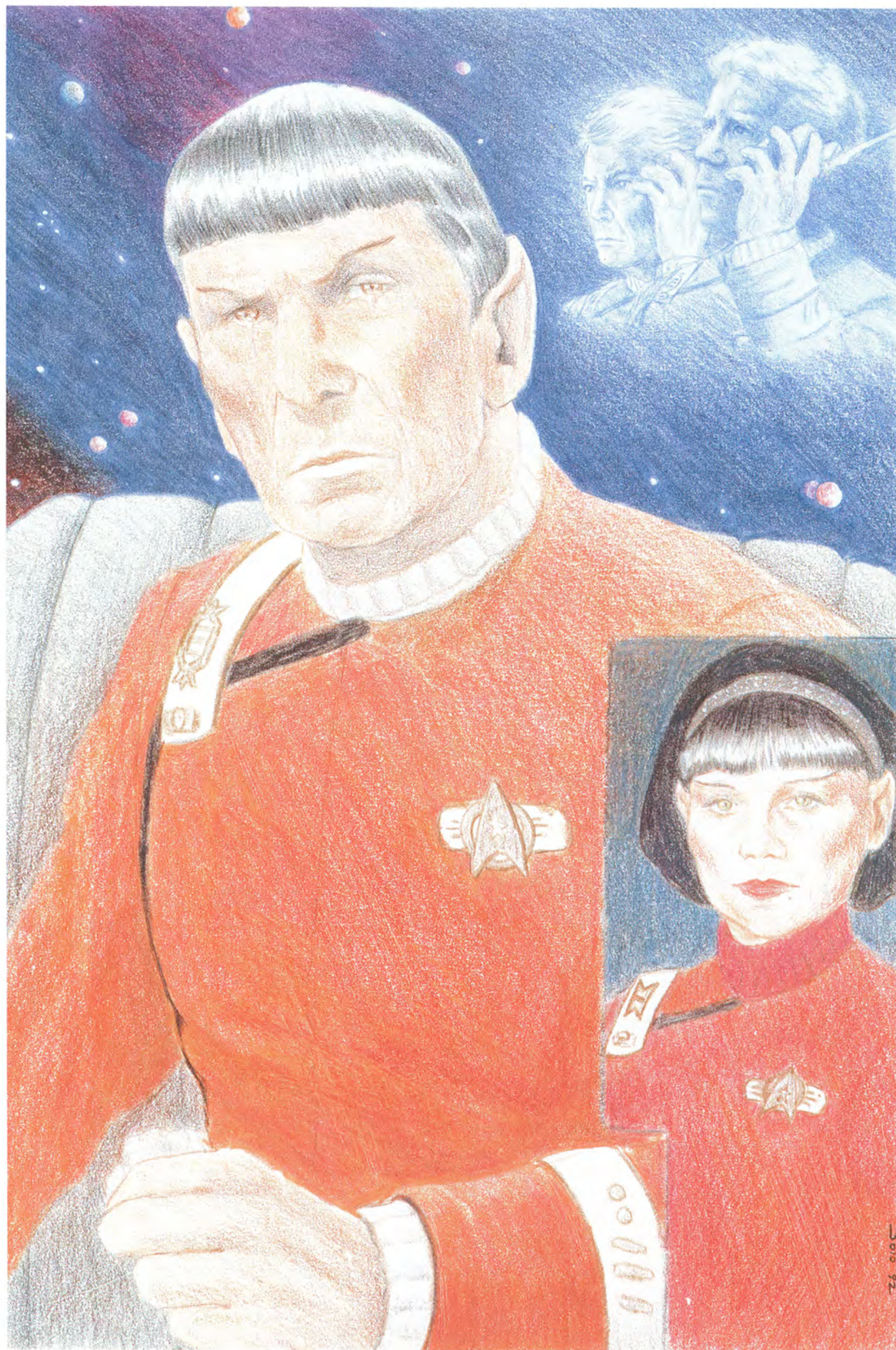
However, he could think of nowhere to go. He did not want to go back to his quarters, back to where he had shared something he had thought very special with Valeris, and where he had briefly faced Kirk, resolving nothing. He shook his head as he walked along. He had been proud, and pride was an emotion abhorrent to a Vulcan. By allowing himself to be so, he had asked for the hurt he now felt.

However, it was more than hurt that he was dealing with. He was struggling with an anger that bordered on rage. He could accept that Valeris had hurt him by her betrayal, since he himself had set in motion the roots for that betrayal. No, what caused his rage was the fact that she had deemed James T. Kirk's life as a means to an end, with no more thought than brushing away a piece of irritating sand.

Life had meant nothing to Valeris. She believed only in an ideal, an ideal whose time had passed. He could not understand that she did not see that, not realizing that a younger Spock once might have been just as blind. Faith and wisdom meant nothing to her, as once it had meant nothing to him.

Spock found himself outside the door of the officer's lounge. He hesitated for a moment, then entered. He stood just inside the doorway and looked around. It was a masculine retreat designed, Spock knew, as a tribute to the man who had been given her first command. This Enterprise was outfitted to replace a vessel that Spock knew could never be replaced in Kirk's heart, but it was a fitting tribute to the man who had done so much in the service of both Starfleet and the Federation.

We've done our bit for king and country. Kirk's words came back to Spock as he stood there looking out at the stars, the words that had been spoken in anger back in the briefing room at Starfleet Headquarters. Was that really how Kirk felt? Was he really ready to give up the life he loved, or



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did he mean it in the lighter sense he had conveyed by those same words when he had spoken with Admiral Smillie more recently at the peace conference? Spock slowly moved forward and sat down in the deep leather seat that Kirk normally used. Those words had surprised Spock back in the briefing room, but the next ones had hurt, and were hurting even more now after all these events had unfolded. *You should have trusted me!*

"I should have told you," Spock said softly to the empty room. "Why after all these years do I still not realize how wise you are, how much you understand. I should have known that even though you might hate the Klingons, you would eventually see the necessity for us to now reach out a hand in peace." He drew in a shuddering breath as he remembered Kirk's anger. "You said I was arrogant. . . ." Spock's throat tightened up as he stared off into the distance, seeing nothing but the man whose image filled his mind, "and you were right." Then his anger returned as he remembered his first sight of Kirk as he looked when he had been beamed up from Rura Penthe - frozen, exhausted and obviously abused, "You did that to him, Valeris," he said, his voice shaking with unstoppable rage. His hand smashed against the arm of the chair so hard that the frame bent completely out of shape. "You put no value on a life that is more important to me than my own!" Tears filled Spock's eyes, but they were not tears of sorrow, they were tears of uncontrollable anger.



Kirk awoke with a jolt, completely disoriented. He had been dreaming that he was back on Rura Penthe and Martia had been toying with him, mocking him as he lay in the snow dying of the cold. "God," he swore to himself as the familiar surroundings of his cabin finally started to filter through the terror of his dream. He sat hugging his knees until his pounding heart returned to normal, then he reached out and activated the light. He needed a shower, a really hot one. He was so cold.

. . .

Ten minutes later he walked back into the main cabin and looked at the chronometer. There were some hours left before his duty shift was due to start, but he knew he would not sleep again. . . did not want to sleep again. He hit communications and contacted auxiliary control. "Kirk here," he said. "Navigation, are we still on course?"

"Aye, sir, the course that was programmed on the main bridge navigational computer earlier in third shift."

Kirk smiled slightly as he heard the curiosity in the man's voice, but was unwilling to admit that he also had no idea where they were going. "Has Starfleet contacted us recently?"

"No, sir, nothing has been logged by communications."

Kirk's smile widened. Maybe McCoy was right. Maybe no one dared to oppose him for now, and were content to let the Enterprise come home in her own good time. "Thank you, that's all," Kirk said, shutting off the communicator.

He stood looking around his quarters, wondering what to do for the next few hours. Maybe he should make a tour of the ship, then he decided against it. Men worked better when their commanding officer wasn't breathing down their necks, especially when he had been there only a few hours earlier. He slowly got dressed, then left his quarters. He decided he would end up wherever

his feet took him. He knew that just walking through his ship would be enough to relax him, and allow him to forget the nightmares of his dreams.

Eventually he arrived at the officer's lounge, feeling no sense of surprise. Somehow he knew he would end up here. Each ship he had served on always had a place that would draw him when he was troubled, and this one was no different. He activated the door as he stepped forward, and walked into a room where he had spent many peaceful hours.

Then he saw Spock.

The Vulcan had not noticed his arrival, and Kirk stood stunned by the look of terrible emotion that was contorting the Vulcan's features, and the tears that were starting down the angular cheeks. Then his eyes went to the mangled remains of the side of the couch the Vulcan was sitting on. Kirk's first instinct was to get out of there as fast as he could, but his best instinct came to the fore and he quickly walked across the room, coming to a stop in front of the Vulcan. "There is nothing that can't be worked out," he said softly, resisting the urge to swallow hard. The last time he had seen Spock look this way was years before, back on the hot sands of Vulcan.

Spock looked up at Kirk, but he could not answer. Having given in to his anger, he could no longer control his emotions. He shook his head helplessly, then looked away, his clenched hand further bending the metal frame of the couch he was still holding onto, as though to a lifeline.

Kirk stood in silence for a moment, then he sat down beside Spock and put his arm around the Vulcan's rigid shoulders, pulling Spock down against him. "It's best to release emotions," he said quietly. "You can often think more clearly afterwards."

Again there was no answer from the Vulcan, only a ceaseless tremor of raging emotion that shook both their bodies. Kirk rubbed his hand up and down Spock's arm. He had never seen the Vulcan so out of control, and could think of nothing to say that might help. All he could do was to hold Spock tightly, and hope that would be enough.



McCoy found them there hours later. Kirk was sitting staring out at the passing starfield, with Spock asleep in his arms. The captain put a finger to his lips as McCoy walked towards them and McCoy nodded his understanding, his eyes going to the mangled piece of furniture they were sitting on. "Been a rough night?" he asked in a low voice as he knelt down beside Kirk.

Kirk nodded. "I came here almost by accident, and he was in pretty rough shape. If I didn't know better, Bones, I'd say he had some sort of breakdown."

McCoy looked at the Vulcan's ravaged face which even in sleep had not softened. "He doesn't forgive himself easily at the best of times," he said, "and having almost lost us has done nothing for his guilt-ridden makeup." He looked at Kirk. "Starfleet has made a tentative inquiry as to where we are."

"Nobody contacted me about it," Kirk started.

McCoy shook his head, but could not stop the grin. "Sulu contacted Uhura. Apparently Starfleet had asked him if he knew where we were, and he thought we should know about it. You'd think that poor boy had nothing better to do than to chase us around the galaxy. He says that Starfleet doesn't appear to be too concerned yet."

Kirk looked down at Spock. "We can't go back, not now. He's not ready. You were right last night, Bones. We've got a lot to resolve."

McCoy nodded, then his sharp eyes went over Kirk. "Have you managed to get any sleep since I last saw you?"

"Some, but I didn't like the dreams much."

"I know what you mean. I almost stopped by the holodeck just to sit in a hot desert atmosphere for a little while."

Kirk smiled. "If you do go, let me know and I'll come with you." He looked down at Spock. "I'm not going to leave him," His eyes met McCoy's. "Could you go up to the bridge and tell Chekov since he's the only one who knows where we're going, that he's in charge for a while? I think I should be here when Spock wakes up. I don't know if he'll be ready to talk, but I want to be here in case he does."

McCoy nodded. "I think that maybe both of us should be. I'll stop by the mess on the way back and bring us something to eat."

"With lots of black coffee," Kirk said.

"I just might add some Saurian brandy to that order," McCoy said as he got to his feet, "but I'm permanently banning Romulan ale from my presence. I can't remember ever having that bad a hangover!"

"Klingons will do that to you," Kirk agreed, "especially when you try to match them drink for drink without eating at the same time."

"Yeah, well, they might not have been drunk, but we still came out the victors."

"No one won or lost this time, Bones," Kirk said, "we all got hurt." He glanced down at Spock. "Maybe no one worse than him." He looked back up at McCoy. "I need that coffee badly."

"Coming right up as soon as I see Chekov." McCoy hesitated. "Do you want to know where we're going?"

Kirk shook his head. "I've never been to NeverNeverLand, and I have a sudden hankering to see it."

"I thought you might," McCoy said with a grin. "I'll put the off-limits sign on the door when I leave. Things are bustling around out there, and I doubt that you want too many people in here."

"Thanks, Bones."

McCoy nodded and left. Kirk eased himself into a more comfortable position, taking care not to disturb the sleeping Vulcan, then his attention went back out to the vast starfield showing outside the viewscreen. He tried to figure out where they were by the star pattern, but finally gave up. He was too tired to concentrate. The stars lulled him with their swift and blurred passing and gradually, without realizing it, Kirk fell asleep.



McCoy found the two of them there when he returned with a tray piled high with breakfast foods, and lots of steaming coffee. He smiled at the sight of his friends asleep in each others arms, then sat down and proceeded to help himself to a substantial meal. He usually did not eat that much when he was with Kirk since he always had the captain on a diet, while he, himself, was able to eat as much as he wanted, which was a source of constant irritation to his commanding officer.

Once he had finished, McCoy settled back in his seat and, as Kirk had done, watched the passing starfield, his mind going back to the many journeys and adventures that he had shared with Kirk and Spock over the years. It was funny how fate had drawn them together — three men who really had nothing in common, but who had ended up with the strongest bond of friendship.

He glanced over at the sleeping pair and saw them once again as they had been those many years ago — what was it he had said at the trial twenty-seven years? It seemed like only yesterday when he had first signed on aboard the Enterprise, and had started the journey that brought him now to this time and place. He had known Kirk a little longer than he had Spock, had felt a kinship with Kirk from the first time that they had met, a time when he had been running full flight from life and a young Starfleet officer, dying of a rare disease, would not let him go. Together they had fought for life — McCoy to save Kirk's, and Kirk to save the doctor, and together they had won.¹

I guess I've sort of done that for you, Spock, he mused. You were running away even harder and faster than I was. Jim knew that, just as he knew that I was unable to face life, and he wouldn't let either of us go. I guess that's why we're still here with him, and why we're in the mess we're in now, because we both care about him so much, and about each other. I told Jim we were at a crossroads in our lives, and he pointed out how things usually fall apart for us whenever that happens. Well, not this time, Jim-boy. This time we're going to make it no matter what obstacle gets put in our path. We've been hurt, but we've been hurt before and we've managed to heal. . . .

A movement from Spock broke off McCoy's reflections and he watched as the Vulcan woke, and gradually realized where he was. He looked over to see McCoy's amused face, then looked down at Kirk's warm embrace which surrounded him. "Be careful, Spock," McCoy warned, "he needs sleep badly."

Spock gingerly disengaged himself from Kirk's arms and got up. That he managed to do it showed how deep Kirk's exhaustion was. The captain never moved. McCoy had never seen the Vulcan look so disheveled - even his uniform tunic was open, and McCoy could not remember another instance where he had seen Spock show that informality. "Why is the captain here?" Spock started. "What is"

¹ "The Hidden Truth", B. Volker/N.Kippax, *Galactic Discourse* 3.

"Shush," McCoy said, putting his hand up. "Let's let him sleep a bit longer. He really needs it. I've brought breakfast, and some really strong tea. It appears that you could use some."

Spock was looking as close to bewildered as McCoy had ever seen him. "Hey, come over here and sit down," McCoy ordered in a gentle voice. He waited until Spock was seated across from him and had a couple of sips of the strong, hot tea before he continued. "Jim found you here last night," he said quietly. "Apparently you were in pretty rough shape, so he stayed with you. . . ." McCoy cocked an eyebrow as he finished, giving Spock an opportunity to answer if he wished.

Spock took another swallow of his tea, then put the mug down in front of him, his attention going to the starfield outside the viewscreen. He watched for several minutes, then turned his attention back to McCoy. "We are not heading for Earth," he said.

"Well, I'm glad someone around here has some idea of where we are," McCoy said with a slight smile. "Where are we?" he asked, unable to stifle his curiosity.

A Vulcan eyebrow lifted. "We are passing the Beta Lyrae system, Doctor. I would have thought that even you would have recognized it from the many colors which emanate from within it."

McCoy looked out through the viewscreen and immediately saw the faint but beautiful colors of the star system he had heard much about, but never visited, then he turned his attention back to Spock. "So we're not lost. How come you know we're not heading back to Earth?"

"To head for Earth from Khitomer, we would have to be going in the opposite direction, Doctor. It would be impossible on such a course to encounter Beta Lyrae."

"Okay," McCoy conceded, "let's just say that Jim has taken your advice and told Starfleet to go to hell." The look on Spock's face caused McCoy to chuckle quietly. "We're on course to NeverNeverLand, Spock," he added.

"Second star to the right and straight on till morning," Spock said softly, his eyes going to Kirk's face. "I did not think he was serious."

"I don't think he thought so either," McCoy answered, "but that's where we're heading, or at least we are going to end up at Chekov's version of it." He shoved some food across to Spock. "Here, have something to eat along with that tea. I'd hate to venture a guess as to when you last had a meal."

"A Vulcan does not need. . . ."

"Spock, spare me from another lecture on the strengths of the Vulcan race, I think I pretty much know them. I also happen to be a doctor and believe me, I know what's best for you, whether you're willing to admit it or not."

"But I should be on duty, Doctor," Spock objected.

McCoy shook his head. "Do you see either the captain or myself racing out the door for our duty shift? No, Spock, Chekov's in charge for the moment, with orders to call us if we're needed, otherwise we're on our own." His face grew serious. "There's a reason you ended up here last night, and a reason why Jim found you. I think we need to talk about it."

Spock's face turned to stone. "I have nothing to discuss," he said shortly.

"With me, possibly not," McCoy agreed, his voice amiable but his eyes darkening with sudden anger. "However, you have put Jim through hell with your damned arrogance, and you need to face each other and work it out!" He glanced over at Kirk's sleeping figure, his expression softening, then he looked back at the Vulcan. "Hey, I'm sorry Spock, I didn't mean to sound off like that. I guess I'm more tired than I thought. We're both here because we're worried about you. He looked closely at the Vulcan. "You gave the arm of that chair quite a going over, for example. . . ."

Spock met McCoy's gaze, his expression growing guarded. "I do not need a psychologist, Doctor. I am capable of. . . ."

"No, you're not," McCoy interrupted, "but you'll be better equipped to face us if you would at least eat something."

Their eyes held, neither man willing to give in to the other, then Spock glanced down at the plate of food McCoy had shoved in front of him. "I am hungry," he finally admitted.

"Good, so go ahead and do something about it. Then we'll just be here in companionable silence, if that's what you want, until Jim wakes up, but we're not leaving here until we resolve this thing."

Spock's dark eyes held McCoy's for a moment longer, then he nodded silently and started to eat. McCoy let out a long, relieved sigh. Spock was going to stay. They had made it this far. Maybe they would be able to go all the way.



It was the smell of coffee that finally woke Kirk. He opened his eyes, wondering why he felt so stiff, only to find himself propped up on a seat in the officer's lounge. "What the. . . ." he started.

"Easy, Jim," came McCoy's voice. "Give yourself a minute. You've been in a pretty deep sleep."

Kirk looked over to see Spock and McCoy sitting across the room from him. He blinked a couple of times, then sat up. "Boy, I've been disoriented before," he started, "but. . . ."

"You are on the Enterprise, Captain," Spock said hurriedly, then he hesitated and swallowed hard. "You found me here last night," he continued in a soft voice. "You must have fallen asleep at some point."

Kirk met Spock's look as memory returned, then his eyes went to McCoy, and the doctor nodded. "You've been asleep for about an hour," he said as he got up, holding out a mug. "The coffee is still hot and, if you remember, you ordered it black and strong."

Kirk reached out and gratefully took the mug. "I didn't count on falling asleep," he said sheepishly.

"You needed it," McCoy answered with a smile as he sat down again. "Spock and I have eaten already, and we were just waiting for you to wake up and join the party."

"Um," Kirk replied as he took a long swallow of coffee, letting out a contented sigh as he felt the caffeine start to flow through his system. "Have we heard anything more from Starfleet?" he asked, taking another big mouthful of coffee, his eyes involuntarily going to the mangled edge of the seat he was sitting on.

"Not that I know of," McCoy said, "and I'm sure Chekov would have contacted us if they had." He pushed over a tray of food. "Here's what's left. Help yourself."

Kirk stared at the items on the plate. "Bones, you never let me near this kind of stuff," he said in amazement as he eyed the sticky buns and the bacon and eggs that had appeared in front of him.

"We all need to throw caution to the wind at times," McCoy replied. "Go ahead and dig in."

Kirk ate a couple of mouthfuls in a hurry as though he was afraid that McCoy would change his mind and take this bonanza away from him, then he put his fork down and looked at Spock. "Are you all right?" he asked, worry sounding strong in his voice.

"I am well, Captain," Spock answered evasively.

Oh, oh, McCoy thought, here comes trouble. The more formal the harder it is to get anything out of him. If he's going to call Jim 'Captain', we're definitely here for the haul!

Kirk did not seem to share McCoy's concern. He nodded a little, then turned his attention back to his meal. "Did McCoy happen to mention to you where we're heading?" he asked as he speared a piece of bacon.

Spock shot a quick glance at the doctor, but McCoy made no effort to help him out. Finally the Vulcan turned back to Kirk, "To a place that does not exist, as far as I know."

Kirk looked up at Spock. "Oh, it exists, Spock. It's a place that exists in each of us no matter how much you might want to deny it. You see, in NeverNeverLand, you never have to grow up, never have to face your problems. If you do run into trouble, Peter and Tinkerbell are always there to bail you out."

"Tinkerbell, Captain?"

"She's a fairy, Spock," McCoy said drily.

Spock thought about that for a moment, then his attention went to McCoy. "A fairy is a small supernatural being with magical powers, Doctor, and they also do not, in fact, exist." Spock looked at McCoy's insulted expression with a hint of satisfaction, then turned back to Kirk. "You know that as well as I do, Captain. Why are you attempting to go to a fictitious place that you know only exists in the imagination?"

Kirk smiled to himself. Spock was becoming intrigued in spite of his effort to hide behind the stony mask he still put in place when he had been hurt. Kirk knew that to hit the Vulcan right

out with what had just happened would have caused Spock to retreat to a place neither he nor McCoy could breach. Now he had Spock interested, curious, and Kirk knew that his friend would not run now, no matter what was said.

"Sometimes it's easier to live in an imaginary world than it is in the real one, Spock. Isn't that why Peter Pan refused to grow up? He would have had to leave all those wonderful adventures that he and the Lost Boys shared every day. He would have had to go out into a world full of responsibilities, and that was something he refused to do." Kirk's face grew serious. "He would have had to come to the kind of world that we live in."

Spock sat silent for a few moments, his eyes downcast. "I do not believe in that other world, Captain," he said finally.

"Which means that you are willing to live in this one," Kirk countered, "in this imperfect world with all its joys and frustrations, with all its pain and its love." He fell silent for a moment, then looked at McCoy, who nodded his support. Kirk drew in a deep breath. "Spock, back on the bridge when we confronted Valeris, you talked about faith. . . ."

"Yes," Spock replied, his voice so faint that he could scarcely be heard.

"I've never heard you use that word before," Kirk said softly.

Spock turned stricken eyes to Kirk. "No," he agreed, "not openly."

"Spock," McCoy broke in gently, "why were you discussing faith with Valeris?"

Spock sat silent for so long that the other two had almost decided that he was not going to answer, when the Vulcan suddenly got up and walked to the far side of the room. "Valeris came to see me in my quarters before we made our rendezvous with Kronos One," Spock started. "She . . . she apparently tried to tell me something of the conspiracy that was taking place, but evidently I did not hear her words. . . ."

"Where did faith come into it, Spock?" Kirk asked softly, almost holding his breath.

Spock turned and looked at Kirk. "When I spoke to Valeris in my quarters, I used the term in the way that we all would use it, meaning things to be believed. She did not understand why established order should change, and I tried to explain to her that she should have faith that the universe will unfold as it should."

"But that's not what you meant when we were on the bridge, is it?" Kirk prompted. "I remember your words so clearly, 'Neither of us was hearing very well that night, Lieutenant. There were things I tried to tell you . . . about faith. . . .' Spock, I could see something in your face even through your anger. You suddenly realized that you were talking about a different kind of faith than you had back in your quarters, didn't you?"

Spock's eyes softened. He could never hide anything from this man. Kirk knew and understood Spock in a way the Vulcan would never understand himself. He nodded. "The faith I was talking about on the bridge concerned loyalty and fidelity . . ."

"But to a person," came McCoy's quiet voice as he followed Kirk's line of reasoning. "You suddenly realized that you were applying your definition as it applied to people, not to an ideal, however outdated, that Valeris was. It wasn't that she wasn't being faithful, Spock, it was that she did not understand the concept as you had grown to understand it."

"I was not thinking of faith in an ideal, Doctor," Spock said quietly, then his eyes went to Kirk. "I remembered a young captain standing on a bridge who needed reassurance that people were more important than new technology or ideas. . . ." Spock hesitated for a moment, then shook his head and looked back at McCoy. "I failed to make Valeris understand that," he said bitterly, "and because of that failure, you and the captain almost died."

"No, Spock," Kirk said, getting to his feet and walking over to where the Vulcan was standing. "You didn't fail — she refused to hear. Valeris is a very intelligent person who was certain that she understood how events should evolve. She wasn't the only one," he added wryly. "I remember having quite an argument with you over the same subject."

"But you understood what I was trying to say," Spock objected.

"Eventually, yes," Kirk agreed.

"Spock," McCoy stood up to join them, "when you were on the bridge just before you performed the meld, what was it that you were trying to make Valeris understand?"

Kirk shot a worried look at McCoy, thinking that the doctor had jumped in with both feet a little too hard for Spock to manage, but McCoy shook his head. "He needs this," he mouthed silently.

Kirk took a deep breath, then went back and sat down. He wasn't sure that McCoy was right, and he also wasn't sure he was ready for the answer, should one come.

Spock stood in silence for a long time, then he turned and looked at his two friends. "You know that I was brought up in a world where you are taught to be strong, but also to be alone, to rely on no one but yourself." He started to pace slowly across the room, unable to stand still as he fought to find long forgotten memories. "Your faith is in yourself and your ability to cope with life in the way you have been taught. . . ." His restless pacing did not cease, and Kirk and McCoy did nothing to break his concentration.

"I knew I had no place on Vulcan. I was different, and difference was not accepted then, despite IDIC. So I left, but I took with me my training to be alone, to trust no one but myself." He paused, then he turned to Kirk, "I met many people during that period in my life, and none of them ever affected me. They came and went, and I remained alone."

"Until you met Jim," McCoy broke in, sensing that Spock was about to falter. "He wasn't like the others. . . ."

Spock shook his head. "Up to that time my faith was in my reliance on myself, and my acceptance of authority. Faith had nothing to do with my relations with others." He continued to look at Kirk. "You were so different. You did not force yourself on me, you just refused to leave." A slight smile touched his face. "How many times I tried to push you way from me, to deny that your friendship was necessary." He started pacing again. "I said something else to Valeris that night in my quarters, something else that she did not understand — concerning logic. . . ."

"She didn't understand logic?" McCoy asked in disbelief.

Spock stopped and looked at him. "No, she understood logic. That was all that she believed in. Even as I spoke, I suddenly realized that I no longer did."

"I need a drink," McCoy said, lifting up the bottle of Saurian brandy. "I don't believe what I'm hearing here!"

Spock watched him pour a brandy, then looked back at Kirk. "As you know, Vulcans pride themselves on their control of all emotion, that is why the discipline of Kolinahr is prized so highly." He shook his head. "Valeris was confused by my reference to faith, and I found myself answering that logic was the beginning of wisdom, not the end. . . ."

"I think I need a refill," McCoy muttered to himself as he lifted the brandy bottle again.

Spock finally walked over and sat down across from Kirk. "I fear that Valeris will never know what this life can offer her. She, as I once did, has closed herself to other people. Her views are very narrow, and logic rules above all." He fell silent for a moment. "I have learned so much from you and Dr. McCoy through the years. I learned how to reach out and accept friendship. . . . He hesitated for a moment. "I learned how much one friend would sacrifice for another. . . ."

"That goes both ways, Spock," Kirk said quietly. "You gave your life so the Enterprise and her crew would not be destroyed."

Spock shook his head. "Not with the finality a human would, Jim."

"The good old katra," McCoy said. "I still get a headache thinking about it."

Spock glanced over at him, a slight smile on his face. "You can see how much I learned about trust and faith from both of you." He looked back at Kirk. "To trust someone with the essence of who you are is the greatest act of faith. . . ."

"I just happened to be handy," McCoy said sheepishly.

"Perhaps, Doctor," Spock agreed, "but I knew that somehow you and the captain together would see me safely back to Vulcan. It was not a conscious thought at the time, just the certainty in the knowledge that it would happen."

Kirk got up and poured himself another cup of coffee, then turned back to Spock. "We've managed to get off the subject a little here," he said, taking a sip. "How much has Valeris hurt you?" Kirk knew the question was blunt, but Spock seemed to be more receptive to discussing his problems, so they might as well get it out in the open.

Spock drew in a deep breath. "She has not hurt me in the way that you might think, Captain. I have come to understand that it was my pride in her and her accomplishments that allowed me to be blind to her actions." His face darkened a little as anger clearly showed. "It was her willingness to sacrifice you and the doctor that has hurt the most, disregarding what I hold as priceless. If you had died. . . ."

"But we didn't die, Spock," Kirk broke in. "Thanks to your quick thinking and that viridium patch. . . ."

"You should never have been put in that position," Spock said bitterly. "You said it yourself back in the briefing room, I should have trusted you. I was as deaf as Valeris . . . I listened no better than she did."

"That goes for all of us, Spock," Kirk said firmly, "so you've got to quit blaming yourself. We eventually did listen to each other, or at least most of us did." He walked over and sat down beside Spock, putting his hand on the Vulcan's arm. "You did not fail with Valeris, Spock. What you were trying to tell her a person learns only after years of living. We understand wisdom now because of the years we've lived, not because someone explained it to us. You were not responsible for getting Bones and me into trouble, we did it to ourselves by refusing to accept change. You heard what Uhura said back on the bridge, that she felt she was as guilty as Valeris in her prejudice. We all were."

"Jim's right, Spock," McCoy said, downing the last of his brandy as he got up. "People can talk, but you can't make anyone listen unless they want to, and even then they may not understand what they're hearing. I think that's what happened here, and if we can be at cross-purposes after all our years together, how much harder must it be for someone like Valeris?"

"Don't let anger rule your emotions here, Spock," Kirk went on. "Valeris acted in what she thought was the best interest of the Federation. Yes, she was misguided, but it's easier to throw life away when you don't know the people whose deaths you are causing. She was the one person on the Enterprise that no one knew, except you, so you are the one she hurt, not us. Don't allow this anger she has caused to destroy you."

Spock looked at Kirk's hand on his arm for a long time, then he reached up and put his warmer hand on top of it. "Nothing can destroy this, Jim. We have shared too much." He looked over at McCoy. "All of us," he said simply.

Kirk smiled slightly as he put his other hand over Spock's. "Are you sure?" he asked.

Spock nodded, then he took a deep breath, willing himself to admit to something he never thought he would ever hear himself say. "I lost control of myself last night in a way I have never done before," he answered. "Had anyone else entered, I would have somehow regained my composure. With you I had no need and, as you have said so often, releasing emotion is possibly the best of all catharsis."

Kirk squeezed Spock's hand as McCoy stood shaking his head, "How many years have I tried to pound all this into your head, Spock? I can't believe you are actually saying these things!"

"Believe that I was listening, Doctor, even if I might have been skeptical concerning the wisdom of such actions. However, I am gradually discovering that you were right."

"That does it, I'm out of here," McCoy said. "I don't think I can take much more of this!" He smiled as he cleaned up the dishes he had brought from the officer's mess, a feeling of satisfaction causing a warm glow to go through him. Spock was going to be fine — they were all going to be fine. They were going to make it this time despite the change that was coming in their lives. They were talking. Nothing could go wrong now. . . ."



"Captain on the bridge!" Chekov warned everybody as he got out of the command chair.

Kirk stopped at the bridge railing with McCoy beside him. "Are you going to tell us our destination yet, Mr. Chekov?" he asked.

"Is that an order, sir?"

Kirk glanced over at Spock who had made his way to the science station and was standing by in case Kirk should order a search, then he looked back at Chekov. "I'm afraid it is, Mr. Chekov. Starfleet isn't going to let us wander around the galaxy much longer."

"Well, sir, first of all I thought of Talos IV. . . ."

"Oh, great!" McCoy groaned. "Here we are at the end of our careers, and you take us to the one planet which assures us the death penalty. Don't you believe in the possibility of a happy retirement, Chekov?"

"You haven't taken that course, I hope," Kirk broke in.

"Well, no, sir, I haven't. The data concerning the planet sounded too depressing, even though the Talosians are obviously a kindly people, rather like their Russian ancestors. . . ."

"Where did you come up with Russian ancestors?" McCoy asked in amazement.

"Chekov, just where are we going?" Kirk demanded again before Chekov could answer the doctor.

Chekov swallowed hard. "A planet in the Omicron Delta region, Captain. I have not been there personally, but after reading the Enterprise's log concerning your visit there, I thought. . . ."

"NeverNeverLand," McCoy said softly, looking at Kirk. "Jim, it's perfect!"

Kirk stood looking at Chekov, but unable to keep the smile off his face.

"I haven't been back there since our first contact." He looked over at the Vulcan. "Spock, you remember. . . ."

"The fight that you had there with a certain academy cadet? Yes, Captain, I do remember that particular mission." His eyes softened as he saw Kirk's smile widen. "I also admit that perhaps I was wrong, Captain. It is possible that NeverNeverLand does exist."

"There's one way to find out," Kirk said with sudden determination, stepping down to the command chair. "Uhura, contact Starfleet Command and tell them where we're going, and tell them we're not sure how long we'll be there. Mr. Chekov, increase speed to warp six. We have some adventures waiting for us." He glanced over at Spock and was met by a raised eyebrow, then he turned his attention back to the viewscreen.

This was going to be fun!

RESURRECTION

By Lynn Syck

I was born in chaos and flame. My first conscious memory is of standing on a trembling surface, clasped tightly in strong arms while the heat of a thousand fires threatened to consume us. It was the end of everything and the beginning of everything. I remember words spoken close to my ear, shouted or whispered I cannot say, but I remember them clearly. "Parted from me and never parted." A promise? A prayer?

Then other words, strange words in a foreign tongue, shouted in defiance to a scarlet sky. I remember being frightened but not of dying. I was frightened of being torn from those strong arms which held me secure. Dying was infinitely preferable.

Another sensation, one of movement, yet not, replaced the conflagration. Momentary only, it ended with other arms supporting me but I was not frightened this time. These arms seemed part of myself somehow. They held me gently yet firmly, guided me to a place of quiet and rest. All was darkness yet I felt a calm, a peace that I was being watched over, cared for, even loved. Words washed over me, soft words that begged me stay though I had no thought of leaving. I felt a connection to that voice, almost as if it were my own. I sought to reach out, connect with the mind that seemed so near, yet so far away but I could not.

Time must have passed, how much I cannot say. There were other sensations of being lifted, carried, moved. Familiar smells and sounds reached me on some level but I could not say why they were familiar. The word "home" lay on the surface of the sounds and smells like a fine dusting of sand but it soon drifted away.

I remember hard stone that cut into my back like knives and pronouncements that flowed over and around me. They did not have reality in the usual sense but I knew in some elemental way that they contained the essence of my continued existence. Without warning, the mind that I had sought earlier began to open to me and return to me that which I had placed in it to guard and protect. Katra. Again just a word, yet so much more. Life. And all that is meant by it. Existence. Reality. Being. And the opportunity to find again the arms that rescued me from death just as my life was beginning. I reached for it hungrily and knew so much, so many things and yet nothing at all.

Opening my eyes, I saw a brightness, a light so intense that it seemed to permeate my very being. When I could stand and see clearly, I sought out the keeper, the one who had preserved the essence of my being. He rose from the stone pallet next to mine, unsteady, weary, yet triumphant somehow. Bright blue eyes turned to me, looking over my entire body from head to foot, seeming to drink in the reality of my existence and then he smiled. A curious thing to do, I thought, but somehow appropriate for this gentle person. I turned to regard the throngs of people gathered before this place of reunion. The priests pressed close to me, urging me to accompany them. Their words drifted around me, some of them connecting, some not. It hardly mattered. I would accompany them. I had no other place to go, at least none that I could readily call to mind. I stood poised at the top of the stone stairs as the rest of my restored life stretched before me but while I should have been pleased at the thought, all I saw was emptiness.

He who is my father stood beside me but that place was not meant for him. I do not know how I knew this, only that I did. So many things I should have known flitted like minute specks just out of reach, tantalizing, teasing, daring me to capture them. We started down the long flight of stairs, past a gauntlet of human faces that seemed to want something of me, something I could not give, did not possess. I passed them by, intent only on reaching a haven of safety, a place I could be alone to find myself.

As if bound by an invisible chain, I could not go on. Turning, I retraced my steps until I stood before the one who drew me back. Words flew between us like threads of a web, binding, connecting us. No, reconnecting us. I reached deep within myself to find the final strand, the golden cord that could complete connection. The name rose within me, triumphant, glorious. Jim. I watched the hazel eyes light and felt warmth unlike any generated by this planet wash over me.

What had begun in flame and destruction realized completion in warmth and healing and the strong arms of my deliverer reached again for me. My resurrection was complete.

DIFFERENT REALITY

By Mary Rottler and Lynn Syck

Art by Christine Myers

Lt. Akemi Franco approached the med-station on Starbase Six. Hesitating by the main door, she tugged on the new blue metallic exercise suit. Though she prided herself on being in shape, this "second skin" as it was called seemed to cling just a little too tightly. Flipping loose strands of her long blond hair back over her shoulder, she entered and looked around uncertainly. Sickbays made her nervous and if she had not agreed to meet Kate here, it was the last place she would have been.

She checked Kate's office first, pleased to see the changes her friend had made in the decor since becoming Chief of Services. The room was empty and as she stepped back into the hallway, the sound of Kate's voice reached her.

Akemi finally located Kate in the first treatment room. Pausing just outside the door, she hid a grin at the sight of the stately Kate Donar receiving a lecture from her patient. An older woman, shaking her finger in Kate's face, was admonishing her. The woman was Eliza Broderman, a very wealthy Federation Council member's mother who was on a self-appointed inspection tour of all the Starbases in the section. Lt. Franco had endured several tirades from Admiral Ravel, the commander of Starbase Six, about wasting Starfleet's time and space on serving the whims of dotty old private citizens. Privately Franco agreed, although she had found Eliza had a personality that guaranteed she got her way.

Dr. Donar glanced up, meeting the Lieutenant's eyes, and Akemi watched her purse her lips to keep from laughing. Turning her attention back to her patient, Kate helped her off the table, steadying her as she caught her balance.

"Mrs. Broderman, I will see if we can synthesize something close to 'cod liver oil' for you, but you must throw away that medicinal tonic you're using. Your system can't tolerate it. And you must reprogram your food processor; no more garlic."

The older woman shook her head, toddled past Franco, grumbling the whole way, and disappeared around the corner.

Franco stepped inside and glanced back at the closing door. "I hope I look that good at a hundred and twenty-two."

Donar laughed, tucking an errant strand of black hair into the neat bun she wore when on duty. "Now you make me feel old. Here I was thinking how young I am compared to Mrs. Broderman."

Lt. Franco grinned, shaking her head. She studied the unlined face before her, knowing Kate's exact age was forty, since Akemi had helped the doctor celebrate her birthday this year. Kate had smooth, clear skin and wore a minimum of makeup, except for her eyes. They were wideset and large and Donar always used an amazing assortment of exotic eye colors that managed to accent them to perfection. With her prominent cheekbones and classic nose, she seemed to give the impression of some ancient nobility.

The doctor retrieved her sweat suit from her office and followed Franco from the med-station.

As they headed for the gym for a planned exercise session, Donar asked curiously, "So, what's the scuttlebutt? Have you found out why the base is on alert?"

"Not yet. Actually, I figured you'd have more information than anyone." Franco sent her a sidelong glance, raising her eyebrows.

"Well, for once having the Commander of the base as a ahm . . . dinner companion hasn't gotten me anywhere. He won't discuss it with me. I know it must be serious by his face, he looks tired. And he broke our date for tomorrow night."

"Ahh, now that tells me something. He wouldn't willingly break a date with you for anything," Akemi laughed.

A wolf whistle sounded from behind them and Franco turned, waving congenially to a young ensign. "Carl, are you trying to make me feel good?"

The oriental face broke into a wide grin. "I was wondering if you needed a cheering section. I'm sure I could round up some friends to give you some encouragement while you work out."

Franco laughed, as they paused to talk. "I think I'll pass on that for now. Check with me in about forty years. I'll really need it then."

"Right." He waved again and headed down the opposite corridor.

Donar was studying her as Franco rejoined her companion. "Do you know everyone on this base? How do you stay so . . . up all the time?"

Akemi shrugged. "It's partly my job. To do public relations well, I need to know people. I really do love the challenge of trying to know hundreds of them." She glanced up at Kate, her face serious. "That's what makes it so wonderful to spend time with you, though. I don't have to be 'on' all the time. I can relax and be quiet if I want to. It's been great having you for a friend. I don't know what I'd do without you."

Kate smiled affectionately. "Thanks," she said softly.

Both women continued walking in silence until they arrived at the lift. Inside, Donar asked again, "So what do you hear about the alert?"

"Just bits and pieces. I'm fairly certain it involves the neutral zone and something to do with one of the outposts there. I've heard a lot of rumors about Romulans but out here that's standard stuff. I tend to disbelieve it. I do know a starship is being sent and I'm fairly certain it's the Enterprise."

A flicker of surprise followed by a quick look of anger crossed Donar's face, before the doctor composed it. Franco watched her curiously, wondering at her reaction.

The lift doors opened. It was only a few steps to the gym. The Lieutenant stopped in front of the entrance, touching the doctor's arm lightly. "What is it? You seem upset about something."

With a trace of bitterness in her voice, Kate replied, "I was supposed to be assigned as CMO on the Enterprise but ended up here instead. The position was assigned to a Dr. Leonard McCoy."

Watching Kate's face, Akemi could see how deeply her friend felt about losing the posting. "Kate, I'm sorry."

Donar gave a tight smile, shrugging her shoulders. "Well, it's a good ship, I've heard nothing but high praise about it. They should be able to take care of the problem, whatever it is . . . even if I'm not aboard her."

She laughed and Akemi smiled in response to Kate's attempt to lighten the moment. Akemi was grateful that she had finally found a friend she could trust.

Together, they entered the gym.



"In a different reality, I could have called you friend."

The Romulan Commander's words echoed in Kirk's mind, the vision of the exploding alien ship replacing the starfilled viewscreen in front of him.

"Captain?" Apparently, it was not the first time his name had been called. Uhura was at his side, her hand hesitantly touching his shoulder.

"Yes?"

"Mr. Scott requests that you stop by the Auxiliary Bridge for a few minutes before the . . . service." Her eyes were bright with unshed tears.

Kirk nodded, trying to reassure her, hoping he kept the pain out of his own eyes. It had been two days since their encounter with the Romulans; time now to send Tomlinson to a final resting place.

He looked up to find Spock watching him. He thought of the Romulan Commander again, remembering the intelligence and humor he had sensed in the alien, wondering what more he could have done to persuade the Romulan to negotiate. Not only would he have prevented Tomlinson's death but would have seen the beginning of an association with a new and different alien culture.

Unable to shake the heavy depression settling about him, Kirk left the bridge.

Spock watched the lift doors close behind Kirk, then turned back to his console, automatically continuing a systems check. The captain's face remained foremost in his mind, the closed, hard look he'd given Spock just before he had abruptly left the bridge. There had been so little time since leaving the neutral zone for them to talk. Numerous systems failures had kept them both occupied. And yet several times he had noted Kirk reacting to his presence in this manner.

Once, he had spoken briefly to the captain, making a formal report about his error on the bridge which had jeopardized lives. Kirk had dismissed the report. Perhaps, the captain had had time to reconsider and now felt Spock was responsible for much of the ship's damage and even Tomlinson's death.

Spock considered the theory carefully and rejected it. There had to be some other reason for the captain's reaction to him.

The computer was chiming softly. A faulty coil was indicated in the navigation system. Spock considered notifying Lt. Sulu but knew Lt. Tomlinson had been a friend of Sulu's. Spock left the bridge immediately to retrieve the replacement part. If he utilized his time correctly, the problem could be corrected with three minutes to spare before the ceremony. As second in command, his presence was expected, and Kirk had specifically requested that he come. It was a difficult concept to comprehend, this business of mourning the dead.

The lift doors opening in Engineering put other problems aside in favor of the needed repair.

The first officer arrived at the torpedo bay with thirty seconds to spare. He remained discreetly in the back to avoid disturbing the humans who had been close to Tomlinson. Kirk acknowledged his arrival with a brief nod.

The service was short but conducted with a sincerity that touched even the Vulcan. By the end, it was difficult to remain in the press of grieving humans; the outpouring of emotion was almost overwhelming.

The room emptied, leaving only Kirk and Spock. The captain stood quietly, his eyes focused on the torpedo bay door. An air of loneliness surrounded him, his face controlled but somehow vulnerable. Spock approached him, tempted to touch him despite his already overloaded senses.

"Captain?"

Kirk drew a breath, and turned to look at Spock. He frowned. "Spock, are you all right?"

The Vulcan raised an eyebrow.

"You looked disturbed . . . tired," Kirk offered, smiling slightly. "I guess that's a stupid question. We're all tired."

The hazel eyes focused on him, questioning. Spock hesitated before deciding to answer truthfully. "A Vulcan's mental barriers are not easily breached, however, undisciplined, strong emotion does affect me."

Kirk's eyes widened fractionally, then a frown appeared as he digested the information. "I should have realized — I wouldn't have requested that you come . . ."

The intercom whistled, interrupting Kirk. Engineer Scott was requesting the captain again on the auxiliary bridge.

Kirk glanced down at his dress uniform, grimacing. "Spock, I know you have a meeting scheduled but can you delay it a few minutes? Scotty is pushing to shut down auxiliary and I'm close to agreeing with him, as much as I dislike the idea."

"Of course, Captain." Dismayed, Spock could not keep from frowning. "I had not realized the problem was this severe."

"I know, our paths haven't crossed much lately. I'd hoped Scotty could pull a miracle from his hat," Kirk said thoughtfully.

"I was not aware of Mr. Scott wearing a hat."

"Well, from under his kilt then," Kirk grinned.

Kirk lifted a hand and Spock tensed imperceptibly for the gentle touch on his shoulder that he'd come to expect. The hand was stopped in mid-motion as Kirk frowned again dropping it back to his side. Spock was surprised by a distinct feeling of disappointment.

"Come on. I'll explain on the way." Kirk started for the door, his steps rapid, but with a heaviness Spock was not used to seeing. A tight feeling knotted his stomach as he followed the captain. Kirk had been working practically nonstop, troubleshooting problems, encouraging crewmen and handling command decisions with only brief rest periods since the Romulan battle. Spock had been working equally hard without any rest periods, and for each problem they solved, it seemed that three more cropped up in its place. Humans were not capable of as much continual stress as Vulcans were without adequate rest and yet there was nothing Spock could do to help.

Lt. Scott was across the miniature bridge, working beside an ensign on the emergency life support console. The captain glanced at the blank viewscreen and after a moment's hesitation crossed to the navigation console. Stars appeared on the screen and Spock was able to discern a barely visible release of tension from his captain as he stared at the viewscreen.

Kirk turned away, calling out to Scott, only to find the chief engineer observing him with amusement. Spock watched in fascination as Kirk's face colored slightly.

"Well, Mr. Scott, I'm assuming you have good news for me."

Scott snorted. "I wish. We had another energy flux in that same line. I don't know what's caused the weakness there, but something has affected the lines specifically in this area. Until I can fully investigate, it will be safer to shut the bairn down."

Spock looked over at the open console. "You do not feel sickbay will be affected?"

"No," Scott replied. "Fortunately, the stress factors I'm finding are confined to this section. I have a theory that the Romulans' energy bolt caused burnouts here, possibly a negative flux I haven't yet located, resulting in this weakening. I can't prove it, but it's the only logical explanation I can give."

Spock frowned. Auxiliary, in theory, was the best protected area of the ship. He followed the Engineer over to the open panel, immediately seeing the damage was severe. The young ensign, looking grim-faced, stepped aside, as Scott gestured towards the faulty line containing a zenocite mixture.

The Vulcan took the tricorder, peripherally aware of Kirk pausing to speak with the weary Ensign Wauters. He studied the readings, glancing up just as the young black crewman smiled at the captain, a gleam of pride shining in his dark eyes.

Kirk's answering smile faded quickly as he met Spock's sober gaze. The Vulcan wondered when Kirk had learned to read him so easily.

"I take it you agree with Mr. Scott?"

Spock nodded, "As quickly as possible. If the zenocite line were unaffected, then I believe we could work around the damage but it is too dangerous in this condition."

The captain sighed. "All right, Scotty. It'll mean our primary life support system is our only means of survival. This has priority over the engines. Assign the appropriate detail. Shut her down." he paused, his face tight.

"Aye, Captain." Scott nodded, crossing over to the communications console.

"Spock, take care of rationing life support suits and life belts, just in case. Set up a class one emergency drill. I want them to be prepared."

"Yes, Captain." Spock felt an unaccustomed chill sweep over him. It would mean reporting to life support and leaving the captain here. He glanced back at Kirk now working at the ensign's side to replace the panels on the console.

Spock knew his steps were dragging as he approached the doors. He glanced back at Kirk again as he stepped into the entryway, almost jumping when McCoy spoke behind him.

"Mr. Spock, I've been trying to locate Jim. I had to desert him at the services earlier." The blue eyes lifted to meet his, an appeal for his understanding in them. "I'm glad you were there. He needed your support."

Spock remained in the open doorway, refusing to respond to McCoy's unspoken demand. "I was there according to the protocol of Starfleet Command, Doctor, although I do not comprehend the purpose of such proceedings. It appears to be a needless outpouring of emotion and only serves to disturb everyone present."

The calmly spoken words served their purpose, distracting McCoy from his favorite one-track idea concerning Vulcans and emotion.

McCoy rolled his eyes, his voice loud with sarcasm. "Wonderful Spock, you probably told that to the captain, too. Lot of help you are . . ."

"Bones, missed you earlier," Kirk's voice interrupted firmly, from inside. "We're going to a priority four alert. If you have a problem, I'll drop by later. Right now we're trying . . ." He broke off, grunting softly.

Spock reentered, McCoy at his heels. Kirk and the ensign were lifting the top panel into place, struggling to align it. Finally it slid into place and Kirk brushed his hands together. "As I was saying, we're too busy . . ."

McCoy interrupted, "I left my cloak and dagger book on earth, what the hell is a code four alert?"

Kirk ignored him, leaning close to the panel. Sensing his sudden tension, Spock started toward the lower level of the bridge. Kirk, face white, grabbed Ensign Wauters, propelling him towards Spock, shouting, "Get out, it's going to blow!"

Spock could not seem to move fast enough. In slow motion he watched the ensign trip and fall, impeding Kirk's escape on his heels. He was aware of Kirk's shouting, and he pulled Wauters to his feet, shoving him and McCoy out of harm's way. In the eternal second it took for him to turn back to Kirk a muffled explosion rocked the tiny bridge, knocking him off his feet, debris flying all around him. Ignoring a sharp pain in his right shoulder, he scrambled back to his feet. Billowing white smoke obscured the space where Kirk had been. Panic clamped a tight band around his throat and he called out in a voice that was hoarse with unaccustomed fear.

"Jim!"

There was no answer. The Vulcan drew a deep breath and holding it, plunged into the thick white smoke. With eyes closed, Spock dropped to his knees and searched frantically for Kirk.

He found a hand, and followed quickly to the captain's sprawled body. Without pausing to check for injuries, he lifted Kirk in both arms and ran to the exit.

Suited figures were already entering the area, one stepping into his path. The figure held up a mask and quickly placed it on Kirk's face and then another on Spock. The Vulcan inhaled the oxygen as he continued moving toward the door and out into the corridor.

"Spock! Thank god!" McCoy was at his side, his scanner pointed at Kirk. "He's breathing, barely. Can you carry him to sickbay?"

Spock nodded numbly. It was an illogical question, since he was already carrying his captain. He glanced down at the dusky face, fear against twisting something deep inside him. Spock took off at a run, leaving McCoy behind.

Sickbay efficiently responded to the emergency. At least ten people surrounded Kirk as soon as Spock lay him on the bed. They performed specific tasks with a calm that the Vulcan wished he could copy. He backed away, feeling his knees tremble.

"Spock!" McCoy called from the middle of the controlled confusion. "How long was he exposed?"

"Thirty-three point two seconds." Spock was amazed to realize such a short time had passed.

"Damn, it probably exploded all his alveoli." Spock's sensitive hearing picked up McCoy's muttered words.

He backed up against a wall, letting it take some of his weight. As first officer, he, not Mr. Scott should be overseeing the emergency procedures in auxiliary, but Spock could not bring himself to leave until he had some assurance Kirk would live. Zenocite was vital to the life support system, and yet it was ironic that it was also a deadly gas in its pure form. It was extremely caustic to the lungs.

Minutes passed as he watched McCoy giving Kirk injections, nurses attached the life support system and adjusted intravenous solutions. Two younger doctors were feeding McCoy a continuous stream of information from medical scanners they held. The Vulcan was so frequently at odds with the illogical human doctor, it usually fascinated him the few times he had watched the purely professional McCoy in action. Now he was unable to detach himself from the figure they were so frantically working on, unashamedly thankful it was McCoy in charge.

There was a sudden silence in the room. A cold panicky fear swept through him. He stared at the huddled group, unable to move, waiting for a glimpse of the captain.

A nurse moved, allowing him to see a pale hand gripping McCoy's arm. Spock stepped closer, in time to hear Kirk's faint whisper.

"Wauters? Spock?"

Somehow he had expected this to be Kirk's first concern. Spock came to his side as McCoy answered, "Everyone made it out fine except you."

Kirk's eyes found his and an almost-smile crossed his lips before his eyes closed and the hand slid off McCoy's arm.

Without thought, Spock grasped the limp hand and lifted it back to the bed. It was so cold.

McCoy touched his shoulder. "His oxygen level is increasing. He's out of danger but I'm going to keep him on life support until his lungs start functioning better on their own. He's going to be weak for a while, but with proper rest and treatment, he'll recover."

Spock nodded, placing his hands behind his back, resisting the notion that he could warm Kirk's cold hands with his own. "I will be in auxiliary, if you need me."

McCoy shook his head. "Not before Dr. M'Benga checks you for any zenocite contamination."

"Not necessary. I did not inhale while I was exposed."

"Well, you can't tell me you don't need that shoulder taken care of. Mr. Scott would have a fit if you dropped green spots all over his handiwork."

Spock, confused, looked at his shoulder, surprised to find his shirt was covered with green blood, a gash showing under the torn uniform.

The Vulcan followed a nurse from the room, letting her treat him in silence. M'Benga appeared and briefly ran scanners over him, pronouncing him "fit as a fiddle". Spock did not comment; the phrase had the distinct sound of what he was learning to label a "McCoyism". He had no desire to find out its exact meaning and an even stronger desire to retreat from sickbay and his emotional display.

Taking the fatigue crewshirt M'Benga handed him, Spock headed for auxiliary without a word. He attempted to close off all conscious thought except what was necessary to assist Mr. Scott. But the image of Kirk's face as he carried him to sickbay and the touch of that limp hand kept intruding on his orderly thoughts. It was illogical, these uncontrolled emotions of fear and concern, and he clamped down again, repressing the emotion. Still, he could not repress the shiver that ran through him.

The hand he had touched had been as cold as death.



McCoy entered Kirk's quarters a few hours after releasing him from sickbay. The captain, against orders, was not in bed but sitting at his desk.

"Don't you believe in knocking?" Kirk's voice was husky.

McCoy edged forward, not missing the red, tearing eyes or his forced shallow breaths. It was possible the medicine was not controlling his cough, and the captain would be too stubborn right now to call for help.

"I'm just checking. I was hoping you'd be asleep. How are you feeling?"

Kirk grimaced. "Lousy. Worried. I'd feel a lot better if you'd turn me loose."

"Jim, I don't give unnecessary medical orders. You need the rest. You should be asleep now and you certainly don't need to be running around all over this ship."

Kirk's eyes narrowed. "I do a hell of a lot more than run around. We're in serious trouble, one step ahead of disaster, and you think . . ." He broke off, muffling a cough. His other hand gripped the edge of the desk as he fought the spasm.

McCoy waited until Kirk's breathing eased then stepped closer. "Jim, I'm well aware of the ship's status, but if you don't take it easy now, you'll end up back in sickbay. Let Spock and Scotty handle it. It's just for a day."

"Dammit, Bones! Don't you understand . . ." An explosive cough cut him off. Kirk again clutched the desk for support, wheezing and gasping for breath as the cough tore at his throat and lungs.

McCoy reached for the hypo he had ready and injected it quickly. He supported Kirk's shoulders until the medication began to work.

Kirk gradually relaxed, rubbing a hand across his tearing eyes. McCoy squeezed his shoulder and then straightened.

"Better?"

The captain nodded, his jaw tightening again in his frustration.

"Jim, I want you to sleep. Rest is extremely important for the healing process. Activity causes irritation resulting in coughing, which in turn damages more of those little air sacs I told you about."

As Kirk started to open his mouth, McCoy interrupted. "Don't talk! Dammit, when are you going to get it through your thick head that you don't have the lung capacity right now to pace your cabin, much less this ship! With the growth enhancer, I'm hoping by the morning you will have improved enough for half duty. That's with rest. Without rest you could end up with a list of complications that will keep you flat on your back for a month."

Kirk wasn't listening. The hazel eyes smoldered in his continued anger at McCoy. He finally gave a short nod that he understood and gestured McCoy to the door.

McCoy tried to keep his amusement hidden. If the captain thought it was that easy to get rid of him, he would have to work harder. "Wrong. I'm tucking you in, Captain. You go get in your PJ's. I'll be waiting." He held up a hypo meaningfully.

Kirk glared at him, then closed his eyes in exasperation. Finally he stood, heading for the fresher, but whirled in the doorway as McCoy leaned over his desk, "Computer off."

"Bones!" Kirk rasped.

McCoy snapped, "I'm ordering you not to work until I see you in the morning. Leave this terminal off or I'll haul you back to sickbay where you should be."

Kirk opened his mouth but then snapped it shut and disappeared into the fresher.

The doctor had to wait nearly thirty minutes for Kirk. The captain appeared finally in a set of silvery blue silk pajamas. He looked more refreshed after his shower, his hair tousled and clean, his face less tense. But he was weaker, fighting for air, shakily crossing the room to his bed.

McCoy waited until Kirk's struggled for oxygen lessened. The increased level of oxygen in the room per the doctor's instruction helped, the captain's labored breaths easing as he sat on the edge of the bed.

McCoy approached him, hypo in hand. However, he couldn't resist teasing Kirk, "I could have your yeoman tuck you in if you'd like Captain. I'm sure . . ."

A strong arm snaked out grabbing McCoy, as he moved purposefully towards the desk. Kirk whispered, "Don't you dare."

McCoy didn't miss the glimmer of amusement in Kirk's eyes. Teasing the captain about the shapely Rand usually succeeded in getting some response from Kirk.

McCoy injected Kirk and helped him to turn over on his stomach. He began a gentle massage, waiting until the sedative took effect before working on the tense neck and shoulder muscles.

After several minutes, Kirk sighed softly.

"Jim?" McCoy questioned softly. "Still mad at me?"

The answer was muffled in his pillow. "Yes."

"I do understand your ship is in trouble, Jim. And the crew needs you. We wouldn't have made it this far without them giving their all and it's you who inspire them to keep trying. You scared at least seven lives out of me yesterday. For a few minutes, I thought we'd lost you. And I've never seen Spock frightened before but he was. Indulge us. We need to know you're all right. That's why I'm doing this. The rate you're healing, I'm fairly certain you can go on limited duty in the morning."

Kirk grunted. "It's nine lives, Bones. A cat has nine lives."

McCoy grinned, patting a shoulder lightly. "So who said I was a cat? I thought I was more like a grumpy bear."

He continued the relaxing motions on the back, increasing the pressure as he began on the tense shoulder muscles. He worked in silence, allowing the sedative to assist his therapy. He had planned this treatment earlier in the hopes he could encourage Kirk to talk freely with him. Even before the accident, McCoy had been concerned about Kirk's lack of sleep. In the brief moments he'd seen him, the doctor had noted the dark circles under his eyes, and his earlier comment about Kirk running around the ship had referred more to the captain's late night prowls than his actual duty time. The difficulty, though, lay in trying to maneuver the captain into talking about his own problems. The instant he sensed he was being manipulated, even with the sedative, he would be on the defensive.

As McCoy started kneading the muscles around the neck, he asked quietly, "What's keeping you from sleeping, Jim?"

Kirk's voice was drowsy. "Dreams."

McCoy kept his voice soothing. "What are the dreams about?"

"The Romulan Commander . . . he . . ." Kirk drifted off, the sedative beginning to take full effect.

McCoy was determined to get to the root of the problem he'd sensed in his captain. He gripped Kirk's shoulder. "What about the Commander?"

Kirk dragged his eyes open. "Keep seeing the Romulan's ship blow up. The Commander was . . . senseless waste . . . he said we could have been friends. Sometimes, it's Spock on the ship. Wish we could have tried . . . stopped the killing, some other way." He rubbed his eyes, raising up slightly.

McCoy pulled Kirk's hand away from his face and eased the captain back on his pillow. He injected the rest of the hypo, speaking softly, hypnotically. Soon, Kirk was deeply asleep.

McCoy leaned back, studying the man before him. Kirk was so very complex, so many different layers. The doctor shook his head. Any other commander would be elated that he had stopped a potential war and defeated the enemy. Instead, Kirk was concerned that they had been unable to negotiate, talk. The captain saw the alien commander not as a proven enemy but as a potential friend. McCoy was also not surprised to learn Spock was a part of the problem.

Since joining the Enterprise, he had watched the growing relationship between the two men with a mixture of hope and fear. The doctor had seen glimpses of the concern Spock had for Kirk, but he still wasn't sure if the Vulcan was capable of friendship with a human.

Kirk shifted to a more comfortable position but did not awaken. McCoy stood. He had known something was disturbing Kirk's sleep. Now, he knew what it was. Lowering the lights, McCoy slipped out of the cabin.

He yawned, suddenly feeling his own weariness. M'Benga was on call. He had one more duty to perform before he quite literally crashed. McCoy called the bridge, locating Commander Spock. He headed for the auxiliary bridge with a frown. This whole damn ship was exhausted. They would be extremely lucky to make it home without any more incidents like the one which had occurred yesterday.

In auxiliary, even with the protective mask in place, the doctor was sure he'd never seen Spock looking quite so haggard. His clothes were smudged, his hair dusty with some white powder. And there

were green marks on his arms that could be scratches or burns from their appearance. He didn't get the chance to ask. Spock caught sight of him and immediately rose to his feet, removing his face mask.

McCoy fought to keep a straight face as he realized how much easier he was learning to read the stoic features. He answered the question before Spock could form the words.

"He's better, resting finally."

Spock nodded; it was a measure of his weariness that it took longer for the mask of impassiveness to drop back over his face. McCoy debated the wisdom of pushing the Vulcan in this state. He glanced around the deserted bridge, his gaze coming back to rest on the lined face before him.

"What are you doing here? I thought we shut it down."

"The ship is too vulnerable without auxiliary. I was attempting to assess the damage and repair it if . . ."

"By yourself? Where's maintenance, this is their . . ."

"Dr. McCoy, there is no one available. Mr. Scott has retained the maintenance crew to maintain our primary life support and the main engines. In order of . . ."

"All right," McCoy held up a hand, forestalling a lecture on military procedures. "I understand. But I have the distinct feeling this is your rest period. And I don't think Jim would approve."

Spock dropped his eyes, turning back to the panel, in a futile attempt to dismiss the doctor.

McCoy studied the thin back and came to a decision. While Spock seemed so vulnerable could be the best time to push him about Jim. "I'm still very worried about him."

The Vulcan hesitated, then turned back.

"In what way, doctor?"

"He's extremely depressed about the death of the Romulan Commander. It's almost as if he feels he's lost a friend."

"That is not logical, doctor. The captain did not know the Romulan."

"True. Perhaps that's not the only friend he's missing."

Spock shifted uneasily under McCoy's unwavering gaze.

"The Vulcans and Romulans are very much alike, are they not? I think Jim sees a great similarity in the two situations."

"Doctor, it is not my nature to . . ."

McCoy held up a restraining hand. "Please. Spare me. I've heard that excuse before. You're not a Vulcan scientist working alone in the High Desert on Vulcan. You're a Starfleet officer serving under a captain who obviously wants and needs your friendship. He could have died here when that line exploded. This ship is hurting and so is he. He needs you, Spock. Think about it."

McCoy turned on his heel and stalked away, inwardly relieved and slightly amused at the look of surprise he had managed to bring to Spock's face.

Just as the doors slid open, McCoy snapped over his shoulder. "Oh, get some rest and eat, for God's sake. Go, share a meal with Jim later. Medical orders. Don't make me hunt up security to enforce it. They're so tired, they might accidentally shoot the tips off your ears."

McCoy ducked out the door, and headed for his quarters chuckling at the thought of a bob-eared first officer.



The stylus Kirk held in his hands snapped suddenly. The captain stared at it, amusement lifting his black mood slightly. If he was that tense, a good workout in the gym could help. It would certainly do him more good than any enforced rest, he thought wryly.

Kirk stood and began to cough, reminding him forcefully why he was confined to quarters. He leaned his head against the wall as his lungs spasmed in the attempt to get air. Finally, after several minutes, one hand pressed against the white-hot pain in his chest, Kirk reached for the medication McCoy had left for him earlier. The urge to cough eased as the pill slowly melted on his tongue.

"Damn." Kirk dropped back into his chair continuing to gasp for air. As the pain eased, he remembered little of the accident in auxiliary, just a vague memory of strong hands pulling him away from the noxious gas. He knew without being told, it was Spock who had saved him.

The twenty-four hours he had spent in sickbay being ventilated, observed, examined and picked over left him feeling like he was a specimen in a cage. He had been so relieved when McCoy had released him yesterday he had almost not minded the doctor's insistence on "tucking him in" last night.

He rubbed his eyes, forcing himself back to the viewscreen that held Mr. Scott's report. There was so little time, his ship felt as if it were being held together with chewing gum and baling wire. He was wondering just what emergency Spock might be coping with while McCoy was holding him captive in his quarters. The doctor simply did not seem to comprehend that there would not be a ship or crew to badger if Spock and the captain had not worked around the clock along with Scotty ever since the battle with the Romulan ship. They had, together and individually, averted several near disasters in the last few days due to malfunctions and overloads the ship was experiencing. Kirk did not have the time to 'rest'.

He shoved the weary thoughts aside, ignoring the fact he did not have the energy to do anything but rest. He leaned forward to study the screen. Again, the Romulan Commander he had defeated began to haunt his thoughts as he had so often in the past few days. Had there been moments like this for the Commander, exhausted, worried whether his ship would hold together long enough to get back home? If he had lived, could he have made it back to his own people? Why hadn't the Commander given Kirk a chance to talk, maybe he could . . .

"No!" Kirk growled, slamming his fist down in anger at the frustrating images. The senseless destruction of the Romulan ship continued to disturb him even though it had been a full week since the battle. He had found the little sleep he could catch was interrupted again and again by disquieting dreams, dreams that were confused images of Romulans and Spock.

The Romulan had exhibited intelligence, strength and even humor at the end. Kirk had instantly been intrigued by the brief glimpse he had of the Commander before the Romulan had self-destructed his ship. Given the chance, Kirk felt sure the two of them could have talked, possibly started the beginning of a relationship. It was what the Enterprise was all about, meeting new civilizations. Surely there was something he could have done to prevent the Commander from taking his life so uselessly.

"Dammit!" the captain snapped. Trying to change the direction of his thoughts, he pressed a panel on his desk. Immediately, the sound of ocean waves surrounded him, the temperatures of the room automatically lowered, and the scent of salt water brushed his nostrils.

Kirk leaned back, closing his eyes, listening. He actively forced himself to see the ocean, relaxing into the sounds. He could almost feel a light mist of water on his face as in his mind's eye he watched a wave crash against the rocks nearby. The cry of seagulls echoed above the sound of the wave.

Kirk's thoughts drifted to Spock and he tried to imagine his first officer on a beach. Somehow the picture he conjured in his mind of Spock, pant legs rolled up, running along the shore barefoot seemed totally impossible. His lips curved into a faint smile as the thought was followed by an image of the Vulcan kneeling in the sand, putting the finishing touches on a precisely built sand castle, complete with turrets and a drawbridge across a moat.

Kirk chuckled softly at the incongruous picture. The gentle sounds of water filtering through the rocks after each wave were beginning to work their magic. Kirk rolled his neck, chuckling again at the barefoot image of Spock.

The door signal rang, the sound strident and disturbing.

The captain tensed, then forced himself to relax. McCoy. The doctor was the only one who would interrupt his own official medical orders of uninterrupted rest for the captain.

Kirk blackened the computer viewscreen, released the door and waited for the doctor to enter, knowing McCoy suspected him of the very thing he was doing. Working. His eyes closed in resignation at the coming lecture.

"Captain? I regret . . . "

Kirk's eyes snapped open. "Mr. Spock?" He straightened, "What's happened?"

"There has been no change in status since you left sickbay. I came to inquire if you would join me for dinner and perhaps a game of chess afterwards?"

The captain leaned back in his chair. "I'm surprised your memory has failed you so quickly. I believe I've been restricted to my quarters for fifteen-ahm, fourteen point three more hours." Kirk watched the Vulcan carefully, pleased when he saw Spock's eyebrow lift just slightly in response to his subtle teasing.

"Fourteen point three two hours." Spock responded. "My memory is excellent, which is why I'm here. You were also ordered, I believe, to cease working, to relax. I thought you might enjoy the diversion."

Kirk rubbed his chin, studying the rather formal first officer before him. His eyes fell on the pointed ears, immediately making the connection between the Romulan and this very special Vulcan.

Considering the qualities of Vulcans, the possibilities of befriending a unique race like the Romulans were infinite. Each time he looked at Spock, he could not help but feel the Romulan's loss even more deeply.

Spock was regarding him again with an unreadable expression in his eyes. Kirk had begun to anticipate this particular reaction to his presence with a sense of dread. There was a nearly imperceptible withdrawal, causing a barrier between the two men which Kirk did not understand and was finding frustrating. The Romulan Commander had felt they could have been friends. He wondered why the hell Spock could not feel the same.

Spock shivered, not quite sure if it was due to the almost angry look in the hazel eyes or the cool air in the cabin.

The captain shifted, immediately touching a panel on his desk and the room enhancer returned to normal, the temperature increasing. With the cessation of sound, Kirk's face altered slightly, assuming the more tired, tight expression that he had been wearing lately. Spock noted the rapid, shallow breaths but did not see any other evidence of distress caused by the accident.

"I appreciate the thought, Mr. Spock. I'm not very hungry, though, and I have plans for the evening."

Without considering his action, Spock ordered the computer screen on, ignoring Kirk's raised eyebrows at his presumptuous action.

Spock barely glanced at the screen before looking up at Kirk, unable to keep from frowning in concern. "And those plans are to work this evening," he stated.

"It's a perfect opportunity. It may be the only chance I'll get to look at these schematics of Mr. Scott's." Kirk had the grace to look sheepish.

"This is his suggestion about the phasers?" Spock was unable to prevent his curiosity from surfacing, responding again to Kirk's flash of enthusiasm, something that seemed to happen more and more often of late.

Kirk nodded, "As you know, he was concerned with the phaser overloads we've experienced. As well he might be; it nearly cost us our lives."

The hazel eyes lost their focus and Spock wondered if he was remembering Tomlinson. Spock waited patiently until the captain frowned, studying the screen again.

"Anyway, this looks possible. I just can't imagine where our engineer found the time. He's been on the job around the clock."

"As have you." Spock studied the strained face before him. "I am certain Mr. Scott does not expect this report back so soon. I believe you might be more efficient if you take a few hours off to relax."

Kirk rested his eyes on Spock's face thoughtfully. "You usually take no for an answer. Do I smell a ship's doctor behind this request?"

Spock met his eyes evenly. "The good doctor did order me to encourage you to eat." The Vulcan carefully avoided the fact he had also been ordered to eat. "But the suggestion for entertainment



was mine. It has been ten point two days since our last match which you somehow managed to win. I would like the opportunity for a rematch."

The tenseness on Kirk's face faded and there was a brief sparkle in Kirk's eyes that Spock realized he had missed.

"Did you ever stop to think I might just want to remain victorious for a little while longer? I'm well aware that you're downright vicious after having lost a match that you thought was yours."

"Vicious, Captain? A Vulcan abhors such behavior."

"I notice you don't claim you're incapable of said behavior."

Spock did not reply. Could not. He was absorbed in subduing sudden disturbing flames that flared through his mind. A Vulcan was quite capable of savage behavior. Their history, as he had explained in the briefing room during the Romulan crisis, was still very much a part of each descendant. It seemed lately, each time the captain's life was endangered, those very flames would sear through his thoughts once more. Control of his actions at those times was proving to require severe discipline.

Kirk was answering the intercom. "Yes, Mr. Scott. What is it?"

"I apologize for disturbing you, I was informed Mr. Spock was there, and this requires a command decision."

Kirk understood Scott's hesitancy. If he knew McCoy, the senior officers had been threatened with some awful medical test if they disturbed him while he was recuperating. "It's all right, Scotty. Spock's here. What's the problem?"

"As I feared, we are experiencing a slight imbalance of the warp drive. I would suggest reducing speed."

The captain sighed. "At the rate we're limping home, we're going to be old men when we get there. Go to warp two point five."

"Aye, sir. I'll be glad to get her into space dock, so we can do proper repairs. The strain with these juryrigs is telling."

"I have to keep reminding myself that without those juryrigs, we'd be years away from help instead of months. It sometimes helps."

"Aye," Scot grudgingly agreed.

Kirk grinned at the tone. Spock was unsure what the exchange meant to the two men. It seemed to be more than a discussion of repairs, but rather giving one another moral support.

"Take care of her Scotty. Kirk out."

Kirk's expression was neutral when he looked up. "I'm sorry, Mr. Spock. I must turn down your invitation. The next free night, I'll give you a chance to win back your honor."

Spock inclined his head, uncertain if he had managed to hide the brief flash of disappointment he had experienced at Kirk's refusal and turned to go.

"Mr. Spock?"

Kirk's voice halted him at the door, and he wondered if the captain had changed his mind.

"Sir?"

"Please inform our CMO that I have a nutrient bar and vitamins so he won't worry."

The irritation in the captain's voice overrode the affection that was usually present when Kirk spoke of McCoy. The doctor must have been overly solicitous of the captain's condition and Spock berated himself for becoming McCoy's pawn.

"I will inform the doctor you do not wish to be disturbed."

Kirk frowned. "I doubt your Vulcan displeasure will impress him anymore than my stripes."

Spock was uncertain how to respond. He said lamely, "Good evening, Captain."

The Vulcan headed for his own quarters, intending to shower and don a clean uniform. The computer department needed a system four check and tonight would be an excellent opportunity to run one uninterrupted. The Vulcan hoped to forestall some of the burnouts that had been occurring in communications by running a thorough system program.

Spock paused in front of his mirror, not seeing his own image but instead Kirk's white face just before the explosion in auxiliary. The unaccustomed panic the Vulcan had felt had been quickly hidden as Spock had carried the captain to sickbay. Kirk would have died if he had not been there. His exposure time would have been too great and not even McCoy's great skill could have saved him.

Spock finished his shower, his mind circling the troubling thought. The Vulcan was beginning to understand the emotion of fear especially in relation to his impetuous young captain. What he did not understand was the half second he stood frozen in panic before moving to rescue Kirk from the dangerous fumes. The reaction was most illogical for him. And disturbing.

He eyed his meditation alcove almost wistfully but strode purposefully for the door. The need to retreat and explore these emotions was strong, but could be sublimated for a while longer.

His even stride faltered as the image of Kirk in auxiliary rose up again to taunt him. Kirk could have died.

He remembered the incident with Van Gelder, when, in his near frantic worry for Kirk he had voluntarily mind-melded with the madman. Spock had only served Kirk for a few short months before that incident and yet had never offered to utilize this special Vulcan skill in all the long years he had served with Captain Pike. It had not been necessary. But he was not entirely sure his decision to perform the mind meld with Van Gelder had been a logical one now that he considered it. His choices concerning Kirk were rapidly becoming more 'emotional' than logical.

Spock arrived at the nearly deserted computer section, his thoughts still struggling with his growing dilemma. The Vulcan had never experienced the type of relationship that was developing between them.

He fed in a series of formula to the computer, closing his eyes with a heavy sigh as he waited for the response. The console in front of him flashed several times, indicating he had entered the wrong

code. Frowning, he keyed in the proper numbers, at the same time clamping down on his thoughts, turning his full attention to his work.



Dr. Kate Donar looked around the crowded lounge in exasperation. A crewman rushed past, jostling her elbow as he excitedly grabbed a young ensign nearby. Half her attention was on the enthusiastic reunion and she almost did not notice Lt. Franco's frantic wave several tables away. Donar made her way through the throngs of crewmen.

"Kate, sit here. I was afraid I'd miss you." Akemi Franco smiled. "This is incredible, I've never seen this place so crowded."

Donar surveyed the room. This was the largest lounge area on the Starbase. She estimated it had a capacity for over fifteen hundred people. "There must be over a thousand in here. Where did they all come from? The Lydia Sutherland isn't that big."

"The USS Constellation just arrived. They were called for the conflict, but now that it's over, Captain Decker has agreed to be part of the welcome home ceremony for the Enterprise."

"I've been so busy preparing for the injured I haven't heard all the details. The crisis is officially over? How can they be so sure?"

"From what I've heard, there was only one Romulan ship testing our defenses, and the Enterprise destroyed it. That's why I invited you here. Admiral Ravel is going to announce the details in a few minutes. He seemed quite impressed with the report he received from Captain Kirk. He wants us to go all out in a 'Hail Caesar' ceremony for the returning conqueror."

Kate rolled her eyes. "I can imagine how the egotistical Captain Kirk is going to eat that up. He always manages to be in the right place at the right time, doesn't he?"

Lt. Franco frowned, her blue eyes sobering. "I wonder. All I know is what I've heard, and he does seem to make the galactic news frequently. Is that because he deserves it, or does he just know how to make himself look good?"

Kate Donar nodded, "I don't know him personally, but I had a friend he hurt quite badly while he was in the Academy. Led her on, then dropped her when he got his first assignment, said he didn't have time for her. Janice has retreated from everyone since then. She lives on a remote science station now. I have the feeling he doesn't care who he runs over to get his way."

Akemi shrugged, brushing her hair back over her shoulder. "Maybe. Either way, I'm to prepare a ceremony to match the victory. He did defeat the Romulans, and I for one am grateful."

Kate stopped herself from reacting. She enjoyed her new-found relationship with the young Lieutenant, but sometimes Akemi tended to be so naive.

Akemi continued, "Starfleet is presenting Captain Kirk with the Palm Leaf with Cluster, and Medals of Honor to his senior officers, Commander Spock, Lt. Commander Scott, Lt. Uhura, Lt. Sulu and also Commander McCoy, Chief Medical . . ."

"I know who he is, remember?" Donar interrupted flatly. The noise in the room was becoming irritating. She had no desire to listen to Akemi prattle on about the Enterprise, especially Dr. McCoy. "When is John supposed to be here?"

Franco smiled uncertainly, her blue eyes reflecting her hurt at Kate's harsh words. Aware of several crewman in their vicinity taking notice of the Lieutenant, unabashedly listening in, Donar felt her annoyance increasing. It was nothing new, Akemi attracted attention wherever she went. Her petite features, long shining blond hair, and bright personality attracted people constantly. Her intense interest in people kept her the center of attention. She and Kate had hit it off immediately when Donar had treated Akemi in sickbay for a virus. The doctor never quite understood what brought them together. Akemi was a real Pollyanna, always looking on the bright side, almost irritatingly cheerful. Kate knew that she herself tended to be more serious and introspective. Still, they had seemed to complement each other. Lately, though, Kate found the constant attention showered on Akemi was beginning to grate on her nerves.

Akemi reached across, touching her shoulder. "If you want, we can leave. We can watch from your office."

Donar mentally sighed with relief. That was one of the reasons she did enjoy Akemi's friendship, she seemed to understand Kate's needs and defer to them when possible. "Could we? You wouldn't mind?"

Franco shook her head, rising instantly. "Not at all."

They wound their way out of the mass of people, and eventually ended up in Kate's office. Even the corridors had been crowded. Donar poured them an icy fruit drink.

Akemi lifted the glass, taking a sip. "Delicious." She leaned forward, catching Kate's eyes. "Do you know Dr. McCoy personally? It sounded like you were angry with him."

"Not really. We went through some Starfleet training courses together. It's just that all my professional life he's been my competition." Donar paused, and smiled when she saw Franco still watching her. "Every time I won some acclaim or made a new discovery, he managed to discover something more exciting. When I contributed to the cure of an Andorian fungal illness, he found the vaccine for that horrible plague on Pentos 3 several years ago. Don't get me wrong, I'm glad he discovered it, but it just seems every time I have something newsworthy happen, his successes always seemed to push me into the background. It's rather funny when I look back, but it's frustrating too. I was first on the list to be assigned to the Enterprise but then McCoy decided he wanted a deep space assignment so I lost to him again." She was aware of the anger in her voice and tried to soften her words with a forced smile.

Franco returned the smile affectionately, relaxing back in her chair. "And you do deserve the acclaim. I imagine it is frustrating."

Kate Donar nodded, palming a panel on her intercom. "So, even though I know it's childish, it rankles when I hear McCoy's name. I can't help but think it should be me there, getting the chance to discover new cures, having the glory and excitement of being on a starship meeting new worlds." She paused, turning her viewscreen towards Akemi. "Here, John's starting his speech."

The two women stopped talking and watched as Admiral Ravel explained the conflict in the neutral zone then displayed a tape of Captain Kirk's defeat of the enemy.

The clips were inspiring, and even though Dr. Donar knew nothing of tactics, it was clear the Federation was lucky that it was Captain Kirk who had engaged the enemy. Otherwise, they would probably be facing a Romulan invasion now.

Her admiration faded suddenly as a quick clip showed Kirk on the bridge, giving an order to fire, McCoy at his side. Donar clenched her first, long nails digging into her palm. She was supposed to be there, not Leonard McCoy. It would be her returning home to gain her share of the glory. Instead, she would take on McCoy's wounded, do the dirty work and again be relegated to second place.

Donar ached illogically to throw something, and only Franco's presence kept her quiet. She took several breaths trying to force back the surge of anger, and was relieved when her friend was summoned to Ravel's office at the end of his speech.

Snapping off the viewscreen, Kate pulled out a mirror, automatically checking her makeup before her inspection of her department. She paused, her angry black eyes staring back at her. She was forty years old. McCoy had stolen probably her last chance at Starship duty. Her future was mostly downhill from here and it seemed hard work and dedicated effort were getting her nowhere fast. It was McCoy's fault she was stuck here.

Kate made a promise to herself that some day, somehow, she would make him pay for all that he had cheated her out of. The promise was cold comfort but better than no comfort at all.



Captain Kirk silently piloted the Galileo into the shuttlebay at the spacestation. His thoughts were still on the Enterprise, thankful that they had finally arrived, and anxious to get started on their repairs.

"Landing pad four, Captain," Spock supplied, taking care of communications. Kirk nodded, gliding into a smooth landing.

McCoy stood, "I'll take your piloting over Scotty's scrambling of my atoms any day." He rested a hand on Kirk's shoulder. "I plan to find a sociable companion and enjoy myself so don't hunt me up tonight." He smiled at Kirk, increasing the pressure on the captain's shoulder. "You do plan to relax this evening, don't you Jim?"

"As soon as I'm sure my ship is being taken care of, Bones." He stood, peering out the window.

"Just don't forget that checkup you promised me tomorrow morning." Kirk didn't answer and sensed McCoy move up to stand beside him. The doctor gestured toward a large group of crewman gathered at the front of the bay. "What the hell is that mob doing?"

Kirk grimaced. "The base is going to be crowded. For some reason the USS Constellation is here. The Commander didn't explain why." He caught Scott's eye. "We may have trouble getting the Enterprise repaired as quickly as we'd like. You go ahead and see what you can do while I wade through the red tape they're sure to throw at us."

Scotty's smile was grim. "Aye."

Kirk returned the smile, feeling that only this man completely understood the degree of hurt he felt at his lady's disgraceful entry into port. Being towed for the last day had eased the crew's work, but for Scott and Kirk it was a humiliation they would have preferred not to have suffered.

Scott opened the hatch, and froze. "Captain, I think you'd better see this."

Kirk threw an amused look at Spock and they both joined the confused Scotsman. Kirk felt the color drain from his face as he saw a guard presenting arms lined up outside the shuttle. He glanced back at the crowd, only now realizing they were here to welcome the Enterprise.

"McCoy," he growled, swinging back to face the doctor. "Did you know anything about this?"

"Me?" McCoy stared out at the crowd, worry showing plainly on his face. "I've been too busy in sickbay to pull a dumb stunt like this." The concerned blue eyes met his. "Besides, I wouldn't do that to you."

"Damn!" Kirk whispered, all his weariness catching up with him. He'd been feeling worse in the last few hours, experiencing sharp pains when he tried to breathe deeply. Kirk shivered as he glanced back at the guard. He just wanted to make sure repairs on the Enterprise were started and then he planned to relax, and forget everything.

He felt Spock's solid presence beside him. Kirk glanced up at the brown eyes, watching them soften in concern and support. He grinned, feeling some of the tension leave him. "I'd rather face Klingons than this. Let's go."

Dr. McCoy trailed behind the other officers, watching Kirk with worried eyes. The captain still wasn't recovered from the gas exposure. He was functioning on barely sixty percent lung capacity which might be acceptable for a chairbound bureaucrat but not for an active starship captain. And he knew Kirk had no desire for a celebration. He was too concerned about the Enterprise. And added to that were his strongly negative feelings about the victory over the Romulans.

The captain, despite his personal feelings, already had the crowd in the palm of his hand. He emerged from the shuttle, smiling and waving. Kirk marched through the guard, no hint of his weariness in the straight shoulders, as he smartly saluted the Lt. Commander in charge of the detail.

In McCoy's estimation, there had been far too little time in the long weeks following their encounter with the Romulans for Kirk to deal with the emotional aspects. Problems with the ship had continually mounted until it seemed only Kirk's sheer willpower had kept them all going. McCoy had lived in sickbay for the last two weeks, injuries and illness from the stress creating a continuous overflow of patients.

He knew the Romulan Commander continued to haunt Kirk, interrupting what little sleep he could catch. McCoy had been able to dole out pills to help him rest, cursing himself all the while for not dealing with the real problem. Each day, he'd hoped there would be some free hours for both of them to relax and really talk, force Kirk to admit his feelings and then to deal with them.

Unfortunately, those few precious hours never arrived, each day bringing some new crisis which kept everyone scrambling to keep the Enterprise in motion.

McCoy knew each crisis had torn at Kirk's heart, both for his ship and his crew. He watched as Kirk nodded to the crowd again, automatically checking his breathing, noting it was shallow and much too rapid. There was a line of perspiration on his forehead. McCoy wondered how the captain could appear so relaxed.

The doctor remembered Kirk, white-faced, and trembling just twenty-four hours before when the two men had arrived at the scene of an unavoidable accident in a shuttlebay. A young crewman, whose face was more child than woman, had been critically burned. The captain had nearly fainted, his unusual reaction more a result of his own injury and fatigue, but McCoy had unceremoniously shoved Kirk to his knees. The doctor had been gruff, focusing all his attention on the injured girl.

Later, when he had the girl stable, he had taken a few minutes to check on Kirk. The doctor had found a pale, grim captain working side by side with an equally exhausted Vulcan repairing the damage to the unit which had exploded earlier causing the crewman's injury. Kirk's answer to his order to rest had been equally as gruff, with a "Later, Bones." McCoy had understood, only interrupting their work long enough to force the captain and Spock to take a supplement and drink some liquid. Both men had complied without argument, more of a measure of their own fatigue than from lack of words. McCoy knew there was little chance of 'later' coming any time soon.

McCoy nearly bumped into Mr. Scott as Kirk stopped in front of a welcoming committee.

An Admiral stepped forward and returned Kirk's formal salute. "Captain Kirk, we welcome you and your crew home and give you the congratulations due you."

The crowd roared at the words, clapping long and hard. McCoy cringed as he heard a part of a cheer about Captain Kirk "murdering the Romulan devils". His hope that Kirk had not heard was dashed when Kirk lifted his head, anger tightening his jaw.

"Admiral Ravel, we appreciate the welcome. What we would appreciate even more is if you could speed up the red tape and start repairs on the Enterprise. Mr. Spock and I . . ."

The Admiral interrupted with a laugh. His curly silver hair and neatly trimmed beard gave him a distinguished look, the picture-perfect Starfleet officer.

"Captain, don't worry. We'll take care of your ship. You and your senior officers are going to be much too busy in the next few days to worry about it." He paused, winking at the attractive officer who stood at his side. "Right, Lt. Franco?"

Kirk glanced back at Spock and Scotty, the little bit of patience he had left wearing thin. "Too busy doing what, Admiral?"

Ravel announced proudly. "Why your celebration! You are being decorated! The USS Constellation is here in your honor and we have planned several events in the next few days for you and your officers." Ravel stopped as an aide approached him, handing him a sensor pad. He scanned it then smiled apologetically at the men. "If you will excuse me, gentlemen. Lt. Franco will explain the details. If you have any problems, just tell her, she'll take care of it. I'll see you tonight."

The Admiral turned, following his aide from the bay.

"Tonight!" The whispered word was like an explosive from between Kirk's clenched teeth. McCoy moved rapidly forward, gripping Kirk's arms.

The petite blond was watching with a bewildered expression. McCoy snapped. "Can we get out of here?"

She nodded and led them through the crowd to a nearby office which was empty. McCoy held Kirk back as the rest filed into the room. Spock caught the doctor's eye, a brief frown crossing his face, but he followed the crew, leaving McCoy alone with the captain.

McCoy, studying Kirk's face was alarmed, at the subtle sign of oxygen deprivation. He shouldn't be experiencing this much distress. McCoy frowned. The captain needed rest and rehabilitation, not more stress. He was tempted to request the pretty Lieutenant beam them directly to the med-station, so he could continue the respiratory treatment Kirk had been unable to finish this morning. Then McCoy could get a complete physical, make sure Kirk wasn't relapsing. With the backing of the Medical Director, Kirk wouldn't be able to argue with him. He considered it, weighing the consequences of involving the base medical center. They could end up with more problems than they needed. And a quick glance at the anger already on Kirk's face stopped him from considering any action right at the moment.

"Slow down. Here." McCoy held up an oxygen mask he'd brought, forcing Kirk to take several breaths. The fact that Kirk didn't argue worried him. Finally, Kirk's breathing slowed, his color slowly improving. The hazel eyes were still flashing angrily when McCoy dropped the mask. His short temper and continued irritation was one more piece of evidence to the doctor that the captain was far from recovered. McCoy lifted his small scanner but it was shoved impatiently aside by Kirk.

"Not now, Bones." Kirk started for the door everyone else had disappeared through.

McCoy touched his shoulder, stopping him. "Jim, all these people know is there was a threat of war from the Romulans and you stopped it. They don't mean any harm. Try to remember that."

Part of the iciness thawed in Kirk's eyes and he nodded slowly. "I'm not making any promises."

McCoy smiled, "Agreed." He leaned close, attempting to lighten Kirk's mood. "Besides, did you get a look at that Lieutenant? She's a knockout!"

McCoy was relieved to see Kirk's eyes twinkle affectionately for a moment. "Why Doctor, how could you ask? Have you no faith in me? Did you see her legs?"

McCoy grinned, shaking his head. "Should've known you'd notice."

The doctor tucked the mask and scanner away, glancing at the small readout of vital signs he'd taken. He followed Kirk into the spacious office frowning, his mind searching through the thousand possible reasons why the captain was running a low grade fever.

Lt. Franco waited for them to enter, not certain what had made Kirk so angry. She had feared he would be temperamental and sure enough Kirk had proved it in the first five minutes.

"All right, Lieutenant, let's have it." She glanced up at his sharp tone.

Franco took a deep breath and smiled. "We have a banquet planned tonight in three hours during which you will be presented with the Silver Palm with Cluster, deservedly so I might add. Your senior officers are also being awarded the Medal of Honor at this time. Captain, you will need a speech, with which I'm prepared to help, since there isn't much time." She broke off. The engineer had leaned over and was whispering in Kirk's ear. They didn't appear to be listening to her.

"Is there a problem, gentlemen?"

The reactions were nearly comical. Kirk's eyebrows rose incredulously, Scott cursed under his breath and McCoy rolled his eyes. Only the Vulcan did not react, standing quietly at Kirk's side.

"Lt. Franco, we've just limped into the station, lucky just to have made it here. I have injured crewman to worry about, and a ship that will practically require a major overhaul to get her back on line. My crew is exhausted, as am I. I have no intention of becoming part of this circus. I want to see to my ship and then relax. I'm sorry you made all these plans, but you'll either have to cancel them or proceed without me." The voice was amazingly soft, but the hazel eyes that challenged hers were flashing with repressed anger.

Akemi glanced at the rest of the officers and then brought them back to meet Kirk's snapping eyes. She remembered irrelevantly Kate saying Kirk would want to be treated as a returning hero, and yet he seemed angry that they were honoring him. Well, whatever the cause of his anger, she was used to dealing with prima donnas.

She kept her tone equally silky. "Captain Kirk, I'm afraid you don't have a choice. You will be at the banquet tonight or I'll have Admiral Ravel send a security team to escort you there."

Kirk blinked, and just for a moment his lips twitched. But if he was amused there was no hint in his reply. "Are you threatening me?"

"No, explaining what your choices are. And they do not include your absence, Captain." She could not keep the coldness out of her voice.

"We'll see. Lieutenant." He gave her a short nod then turned on his heel and left the room. His officers followed and Franco had a brief impression of a royal procession, the King and his loyal court.

Akemi hid a smile, she was not surprised to find Kirk was going to be difficult to handle. She was rather nonplused that he seemed displeased with the very idea of the ceremony, nor had any of his officers seemed happy with the idea. It would be interesting to see what Kate Donar thought of their reactions.



Dr. Donar looked up from her computer terminal as the sound of laughter floated through her office door. She stepped out, finding McCoy and Captain Kirk just inside the med-station doors. A Vulcan stood behind them, face impassive, flanked by two security guards who were trying hard not to smile.

She saw the Vulcan officer say something which resulted in both men straightening as they caught sight of her. The attempt to restrain their amusement became impossible when Kirk glanced in McCoy's direction and another chuckle escaped.

"Well, Dr. McCoy, do you plan to camp on my doorstep?" Donar managed to keep the sarcasm from her tone. McCoy had spent most of the afternoon supervising the transfer of the patients from the Enterprise.

"Seems like it, doesn't it?" McCoy said. "Dr. Donar, this is my Captain, James Kirk and our First Officer, Mr. Spock. The captain wanted to see Cindi Jordan before we're . . . uh, escorted to the ball." He sent a wry glance at the guards.

Donar lifted an eyebrow at the guards. "Rather an unusual escort for guests of honor, isn't it?"

McCoy shrugged, glancing at Kirk. The Vulcan, Spock said in a dry, serious tone, "I believe it is known as an honor escort."

Kirk looked back at Spock in disbelief while McCoy snorted. Donar stepped forward, extending a hand. "Of course. Call me Kate. I'm glad to meet you and Mr. Spock."

Kirk's hand was warm as he held hers firmly. His hazel eyes smiled at her, charming Kate against her will. "I understand you were almost assigned to the Enterprise at one time. Your presence would certainly have graced my ship."

The sincerity and warmth she felt radiating from the captain made Donar even more aware of what she was missing.

Kate gestured down a corridor. "Dr. McCoy, I believe you know the way. I'm also supposed to be at the festivities tonight, but if I don't get the paperwork straight with your transfers I'm not going anywhere."

She watched the three men leave the ward, and ordered the guards to wait for them at the door. Donar slipped back into her office, curiously turning on her viewscreen, briefly glancing at the patient in isolation before keying in on the officers from the Enterprise.

Cindi Jordan had been critically burned and was isolated to protect her from bacteria. Donar watched as the captain properly observed the isolation procedures, and went to the patient's side. Impatiently, she returned her pickup to the two men outside the room.

McCoy was talking to Spock, gesturing as he did so. Kate increased her volume, catching the middle of an intriguing sentence.

" . . . should be resting now. In fact, I'm close to demanding he bypass tonight, and keep him under observation. If he'd only let me know earlier he was feeling like this, but I haven't been able to corner him all day."

The Vulcan seemed unmoved, although he did glance toward the room Kirk was in. "I have never known you to keep silent before."

"I . . . well, I don't want to take a chance he'll end up here under Dr. Donar's care."

Kate leaned forward, eyes narrowing. What did McCoy mean by that?

Spock ordered, "Explain."

McCoy hesitated, "She's an excellent doctor, Spock, don't get me wrong. It's just that . . . Jim's condition could be misinterpreted."

Kate felt her pulse quicken. Something was going on here, something important.

The Vulcan's eyes were riveted on McCoy. His voice was entirely flat. "Doctor, would you please get to the point?"

"If the captain's lung capacity were strictly interpreted he could be grounded and until it improves . . . "

"Bones," Kirk's voice made both McCoy and Donar jump. "Let's get this party over with."

Donar stared at the screen, her mind racing. She had noticed Kirk's pallor when she had first seen him, but had not automatically suspected he was ill; there were many races aboard the Starbase, she had become somewhat used to startlingly pale skin on a health individual.

The three men were slowly making their way back to their escort, taking time to visit some of the Enterprise crewmen on the way. Donar could not see any signs of distress in Kirk. Of course up to now, she had not known she was supposed to be watching for signs of anything.

Kate's nail tapped insistently on the desk as she considered the information she had just overheard. Touching a stud, Donar pulled up Kirk's medical reports which McCoy had filed. She felt a smile of wicked joy tug at her lips. Perhaps she was going to have that opportunity to make McCoy understand how it felt to lose.

The doctor stood, ordering off the viewscreen. Donar glanced briefly at her uniform and smiled. First, she would make a stop in her quarters. If she intended to get to know the captain of the Enterprise better tonight, she would need to look the part. And she knew just the dress.

The Enterprise officers were just passing her office. Kate waited until they were gone and then slipped out a separate exist. Heading for her quarters, Kate was unable to keep from smiling as she strode down the corridor.



Kirk wiped a layer of sweat from his face, tiredly resting his head against the tree behind him. The party in celebration of his defeat of the Romulans was in full swing. Strains of music and laughter floated from behind him, reminding the captain of his duty to return and play the part of triumphant hero.

The captain sighed, unable to fully appreciate the beauty of the huge meandering garden surrounding him. He had managed to slip away from the almost smothering crowds. Everyone seemed to want something from him. All Kirk knew was with each smile he bestowed, a piece of his soul seemed to slip away. He was weary of being congratulated on the destruction of living beings.

Suddenly, the image of the Romulan Commander loomed in front of him, the soot and burns visible on his face. His voice was direct, concise, 'We each have our duty . . . ' The vision faded, replaced by Spock's impassive features. He shivered, not sure if the sudden chill was from the artificial scented breeze he felt or due to his confusion at Spock's behavior. He reminded himself he was exhausted, and more sensitive to the abrupt Vulcan demeanor. He needed Spock's friendship right now and was not entirely sure the Vulcan was capable of such a relationship. It was possible Kirk was expecting entirely too much from his first officer. Spock was constantly reminding his human shipmates, especially Dr. McCoy, that he was incapable of emotion.

Kirk rubbed a hand over his face, frowning. He forced the troubling thoughts away. He had retreated to this unexpected haven to seek the peace and tranquility of the garden. The architect who designed this starbase had to have been a romantic. The garden was strategically placed next to the banquet hall.

Kirk leaned forward, stealing a last breath filled with the fresh scent of pine. He knew he should return soon to the party before he was hunted down by Franco's security regiment. Kirk grinned, shaking his head as he remembered the sight of the petite Lieutenant flanked by security men two times her size meeting him at the shuttlebay. He had been angry then, because she would not let him return to the Enterprise to confer with Scotty before the party. Instead he had been forced to return to his temporary quarters to dress and review the speech she had prepared for him. Now, with McCoy's helpful badgering, he had begun to develop a sense of humor about the incident.

Hearing voices nearby, Kirk stood, steadying himself against an unexpected dizziness. He blinked, attempting to clear his blurring vision, the room spinning around him. Sitting back down on the edge of the bench, Kirk tried to slow down his breathing. Gradually, the room steadied, and he leaned back carefully. Sweat was pouring off him now, and he felt almost nauseatingly warm. Opening his tunic, he slumped against the tree beside the bench.

"Captain?" The voice called, repeating softly, "Captain Kirk?"

Kirk opened his eyes, disoriented for a moment. Spock was leaning over him, the brown eyes soft with concern.

The captain straightened, embarrassed. "I must have dozed off."

Spock nodded, pulling his arms behind him in a more military manner. "You have been understandably tired." He glanced around at the sound of voices. "Your absence however has been noted."

Kirk grimaced. "Meaning Lt. Franco is looking for me."

"Yes," Spock agreed. "And several officers from here on base who wish to commend you for your speech. They have asked me to convey their congratulations. There also seem to be a number of young ladies requesting your presence."

Kirk glanced at Spock out of the corner of his eye. He wondered if it was his imagination that a hint of a smile was on the unemotional face.

"Yes, well, it feels more like a circus with me in the center ring." Kirk ran a hand quickly over his face, wishing he could splash the cobwebs away in his brain with some cold water. Actually he could use a shower, he was reeking with sweat. His shirt was damp and it made him shiver. The captain frowned, irritated. As a Vulcan, Spock must be thoroughly annoyed with his captain's malingering. Because of Kirk's slow recovery, Spock had been forced to work twice as hard and yet here he was, appearing dignified and resplendent in his dress uniform, no hint of his own fatigue.

Frustrated with his continuing weakness, Kirk pulled his tunic into place, closing the collar snugly around his neck. "McCoy's right, these are damned uncomfortable."

"I have experienced no discomfort such as the doctor has described. Of course, I have not attempted some of the activities the doctor engages in while wearing it." Spock cocked his head slightly, as if daring Kirk to reply.

"Are you suggesting, Science Officer, that we experience discomfort because we enjoy practicing . . . ahm mating rituals while in dress uniform?" Kirk challenged, managing to keep a straight face as he cocked an eyebrow back at the Vulcan.

Again, there was a hint of a smile, although Spock remained at his parade rest stance. "Based upon scientific observation, Captain."

Kirk met his eyes, a smile quirking the corners of his lips. "I see. Too bad I have no interest in that particular activity tonight, it sounds like you need more opportunity to gather more for your analysis." He paused, catching his breath, managing to arrest his automatic move to loosen his tunic collar again. It not only was uncomfortable, but also restricted his breathing.

Instead of feeling better after his unplanned rest, Kirk was becoming more aware of his growing discomfort. He was curiously light-headed, his hand shaking slightly. And despite his sweating earlier, now he was feeling progressively colder. He had to fight the urge to breathe faster, his chest was tight and felt strangely out of synch with each breath.

"Captain . . ." Spock started.

Kirk glanced up, embarrassed again by his weakness. There was no reason for him to be feeling like this so long after his injury.

"I imagine we'd better get back before I find myself in the brig for disobeying orders." Kirk smiled, not only in an effort to reassure Spock but himself as well. He reached down, pulling a hidden communicator out of his boot. "But, first I wanted to check in with Scotty."

Spock frowned, but didn't comment. He moved a few feet away to wait, turning to examine an unusual budding plant.

Kirk flipped the grid open. "Mr. Scott?"

"Captain Kirk?" The familiar burr answered, "I thought you were captive participants."

"Mr. Spock and I put our heads together and gave them the slip. As a team we're unbeatable."

"Aye, I'll give you that, but I don't want to be around when that pretty lassie takes your head off, beggin' your pardon sair. You'll be wantin' to know how the repairs are coming along."

"Aye. Good news or bad?" Kirk imitated the Scotsman's accent, grinning at Spock's raised eyebrows.

"You'll be happy to hear it's good. Lt. Franco may have the personality of a Tellerite, but she is as good as her word. The repairs are further along than even I could expect. I estimate at this rate two weeks . . . possibly ten days for repair time."

"You're serious?" Kirk stared at the communicator then turned disbelieving eyes toward the Vulcan, a smile lighting his face. "Scotty, how are the transporters coming along? Could you . . ."

Kirk stopped, catching sight of Lt. Franco coming down the path towards them, her metallic blue gown shimmering gracefully around her. Her hair was caught up with a simple gold clasp, the long strands falling below her shoulders, and Kirk had to admit the effect of her blond curls against the sparkling blue of her dress was very beguiling.

Scott was completing his thought and it was obvious the Lieutenant could hear the engineer's words by the frown that appeared.

"Tis sorry that I am to be putting a burr in your escape plans but the transporters are still inoperative."

Franco nodded to Spock as she passed him, coming to stand in front of Kirk. She held out her hand. "Captain, I think that may be safer in my possession."

Kirk shook his head resignedly. He held the grid closer, his eyes never leaving her face. "Mr. Scott, code green. The pretty lass has discovered us. Kirk out."

The engineer's laugh was clear. "Aye, code green it is."

Kirk closed the communicator, and ignoring her outstretched hand, slid it back into his boot. He stood, casually leaning on the tree beside him against the dizziness the movement caused.

Franco arched an eyebrow prettily at him. The blue eyes were laughing, in spite of her sober expression. "And what exactly is code green? Not some mystery sequence that beams you out of here I hope."

"No," Kirk shook his head. "It means my goose is cooked but leave me in the soup."

"I doubt your goose is ever cooked but yes, you are in the soup." She glanced back towards the entrance. "Your presence is being missed, especially after your speech. Everyone is anxious to meet a genuine hero."

Kirk flinched. He wished this nightmare would end. Another shiver worked its way through him, leaving him trembling and weak-kneed. Kirk held on firmly to the tree, thankful for its support but not entirely sure he was going to remain standing.

Kirk looked up in time to see Spock start towards him. He held up a hand, forcing himself to straighten.

Franco was also watching him, concern on her face. She touched his arm. "Captain, are you all right? You're pale as a ghost!"

Kirk shook his head, snapping irritably, "I'm fine." The chill was gone and the shakiness was also easing. He straightened, glaring when Franco touched his forehead.

"You're ill! You've got a fever. Why didn't you tell me? I'll get Dr. Donar, she should be nearby."

Kirk gritted his teeth. The last thing he needed was two women fussing over him. "Lieutenant." He caught her arm as she turned to go in search of Donar. "I'm all right. I'm tired and looking forward to a long period of uninterrupted sleep. And once this party is over, that is what I intend to do."

"But you're . . ." At his continued glare, Franco stopped. Kirk shifted his gaze to Spock. The Vulcan's expression was impenetrable. Kirk fought against another chill, forcing himself away from the tree. With determination, he started down the path.

Step by step, he felt steadier. It couldn't be much longer before this was over. Franco had indicated the official part of the ceremony was complete. All he had to do was charm a few more stuffed shirts — he amended that to diplomats and their wives. Something he could do in his sleep.



He made it to the Vulcan's side. Dark eyes met his evenly, the anger flashing in the black depths surprising Kirk. He hesitated, "Spock?"

"Why do you humans insist on denying your frailties?"

Kirk closed his eyes against the angry words even though they were spoken too softly for Lt. Franco to overhear.

"I'm tired, Spock. As you must be too. I'm afraid my human stamina isn't up to your . . . " He broke off, the tickle in his throat causing him to cough.

He fought it, trying to make it light. Still, the cough seared the left side of his chest, the sharp burning pain causing tears to sting his eyes. His instinctive gasp for air brought on a fresh bout of coughing that would not stop. He was aware of holding on to someone, but his whole world narrowed quickly down to his struggle to get air into his lungs.

A hand touched his face and he leaned into the warmth, his fight to breathe easing suddenly. Cautiously, he took several slow breaths. Kirk felt better, relaxed and safe. Floating, he basked in the sensation of total well-being. Then the warmth withdrew, leaving Kirk empty, strangely alone.

"Captain?"

Kirk opened his eyes. His hands were clutching Spock's arms. He dropped them but was relieved when Spock shifted, placing his arm around Kirk to support him. Silently, Spock guided him back towards the bench. Kirk remained quiet, concentrating on the effort to make his trembling legs move.

As soon as he was back on the bench, Spock ordered firmly, "Captain, I will bring Dr. McCoy. You will remain here with Lt. Franco."

Franco hovered uncertainly at Kirk's side, watching Spock's dignified exit. She glanced at the captain. He still sat hunched over on the bench, one hand massaging his forehead. She sensed by his response earlier that he would not appreciate her sympathy.

Kirk straightened, a light sigh escaping. Akemi stole a glance at his face and decided some of his color had returned.

"I haven't quite decided if this isn't some elaborate escape plan by you and your first officer." She allowed a smile to dimple her cheeks as Kirk looked up at her.

The smile that was returned was a mixture of relief and gratitude. "Is it working?" he responded.

"A little too well." She went to his side, tugging loose the end of her gown that slid over Kirk's knee as she sat down. "Guess I'll have to give up my hope to dance with you tonight. I would have been the envy of the base tomorrow."

Kirk grinned again, his eyes sparkling for a moment. "I was afraid you were going to make me dance with security." He glanced back down the path, his eyes sobering. "Mr. Scott tells me you have worked miracles with repairs to my ship. Having had some experience with the amount of red tape that involves, I am in your debt."

Akemi shook her head. "That's part of my job. And as for owing me, you've paid in full. That speech you gave earlier left me . . . absolutely speechless. I was spellbound the whole time, and I know I wasn't alone." She paused watching his face. He was listening but the frown was reappearing that he wore each time the Romulans were mentioned. "I don't mean to gush, but I've had too many people here already tell me they felt the same way after your talk. You made us proud of being in the fleet, of being out here, exploring the unknown, even if our jobs seem insignificant."

Kirk looked away, rubbing his forehead again. "Sorry I didn't use your speech."

"I'm not." She paused. He was less defensive with her now than with any of her previous conversations. Akemi decided to take a chance and ask a more personal question. "You're disturbed each time your victory with the Romulans is mentioned. I've reviewed the log tapes with Admiral Ravel, and I don't understand. Why are you so . . . angry about the celebration?"

Kirk shifted, and then studied her face carefully. "Do you remember what I said our mission is, the reason we're out here in space?"

Taken off guard, Franco frowned. The words, though, were easy to recall. "To explore and seek out new life. And through that contact, grow individually and as a race with each new experience."

Kirk was looking at her with an amused grin lifting one corner of his mouth. "You really were listening."

He paused again, his eyes closing for a moment. She watched as a tremor shook his broad frame for several seconds and glanced up anxiously, hopeful that Mr. Spock was returning.

Kirk's soft voice caught her attention. "Wouldn't you consider the Romulans a new race, Lieutenant?"

"The Romulans? New? Not really, we already know they are brutal, violent. They have no desire to cooperate with us."

"How do you know that for certain?" The hazel eyes were intense, holding her own captive. "They are a warrior race, I'll agree. But as we know from ancient history, there's much to be gained from warriors. It takes strength, pride and innovative minds to survive."

"But the Romulans are uncivilized, their only desire is to kill. How can you so easily discount the seven outposts that were destroyed? There were over a thousand people. Murdered! And they almost destroyed your ship, costing you the life of a crewman."

He had not forgotten. Akemi regretted mentioning the lost lives. The pain over the loss was easily read in those expressive eyes. She remembered his one demand had been to arrange leave and transportation home for the widowed fiancé, Martinez.

"Yes," Kirk affirmed. "But are we to judge the whole race by this one ship? And if we were to draw conclusions from the actions of this Romulan about the race, then we'd have to include honor, bravery, cunning, intelligence and respect for duty." He paused again, more it seemed to catch his breath than to collect his thoughts.

Impulsively, Akemi reached down and grasped his hand. "You liked the Romulan Commander, didn't you?"

Kirk glanced at her from the corner of his eye, "Liked him? Respected would be a better term." His hand curled around hers. "I do regret his death. It seems rather symbolic of the lost opportunity to communicate with a new race. I had a chance and missed it. To me, this mission was a failure."

"And that's why it angers you when you're congratulated for defeating them." She squeezed his hand. "I understand a little better now. But can you forgive us for being glad we're alive? For being glad you're alive?"

Kirk stared down at their hands, and she had the distinct feeling his thoughts were light years away.

Then, surprisingly, he lifted her hand in his and kissed it lightly. She looked up and he flashed her a smile that transformed his face, amazingly wiping away any vestiges of self-doubt or illness. He smiled more with the left side of his mouth than the right but with every bit of dynamic energy his being possessed. She felt herself responding with a smile of her own, her heart racing.

The hazel eyes widened in appreciation, dipping down briefly to her lips then back to meet hers, a flicker of teasing glinting as he lowered his eyelashes. He did this so effortlessly, she understood why so many broken hearts were left behind without his conscious intent.

Franco had watched him charm several of the diplomats at the dinner earlier and had been entranced herself during his speech. But she, personally, had never experienced his powerful magnetism until this moment. It explained the blind loyalty of his crew that Akemi had observed but not understood. Until now.

Akemi drew a breath, wondering how long it had been since the last one she had taken. She smothered a self-mocking laugh, shaking her head. It was interesting to have the shoe on the other foot. She didn't have Jim Kirk's power, but she was used to enchanting people with her looks and empathic ability. Rather disconcerting, if she examined her own unexpected response to Kirk too closely.

"I'd forgive you anything if you'd smile at me like that all the time," Kirk said. It took Akemi a moment to remember what he was forgiving. "I think . . ."

He was interrupted by Admiral Ravel, who was approaching them around the curve of the garden path, Kate Donar at his side. Franco was glad to see Kate, Spock must have found her instead of McCoy.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Akemi called out "Admiral, Kate, I'm glad you're here."

Her friend, however, did not appear pleased to see her. The black eyes were staring, not at Kirk, but at her hand which Kirk was still holding.

Akemi felt a wave of annoyance at Kate's reaction. She pulled her hand free, standing in one graceful motion. The captain also stood, draping his arm casually around her shoulders, and she had to brace herself to steady him. She glanced up at him in alarm. "Captain . . ."

Kirk shook his head minutely, reassuring her with a tight smile, turning towards Ravel and Donar.

Obviously, he did not intend for the Admiral to know he was ill. This was totally insane. Exasperated, Franco tried to catch Kate's eye. "Kate, the Captain . . ." She began but again Kirk stopped her simply by overriding her.

"Admiral Ravel, I'm glad to get a chance to thank you for your welcome. My crew has enjoyed the celebration, and after these last few weeks they needed an opportunity to 'let go'." He paused, his voice dropping. "I just hope they don't . . . celebrate too hard and get into any trouble."

Ravel laughed. "Boys will be boys, eh Captain? They deserve it. Don't worry, my security people will keep them in line . . . discreetly."

Kirk's arm was growing steadily heavier, and she could feel fine tremors shaking him. She slipped her arm around his waist, and then tried again to get Kate to listen to her.

Donar was also staring at Kirk. Franco knew she could not miss the obvious systems he was displaying. For the Admiral not to notice anything amiss was not unusual, but not Kate. Akemi caught Kate's eye, nodding at Kirk. She opened her mouth to speak and stopped. The dark eyes stared at her with a contempt and anger that totally shocked Franco. She had never known Kate to even express such feelings.

Ravel was continuing to talk to Kirk, explaining some minute detail about security. Akemi glanced uncertainly at Kirk and then back to Kate.

Her friend ignored her, tugging on Ravel's sleeve and leaned over to whisper something in his ear. The Admiral smiled affectionately and, linking his arm through hers, he gave Kirk and Franco a slight bow.

"Captain, I'll be seeing you tomorrow. Lt. Franco, what time is his appointment?"

Kirk was beginning to tremble. Franco stammered, not believing Kate was failing her so completely. "Appointment? I'll have to check."

Ravel smiled. "Tomorrow." They both continued past Kirk and Franco down the maze of pathways.

Almost before they were out of sight, Kirk's knees buckled and he would have fallen if not for her support. She eased him back on the bench, looking around wildly for help.

Kirk's breathing rapidly became more labored, his color fading to an ashen gray. The worsening tremors seemed to make his battle to breathe even more difficult.

He lifted his head. His hazel eyes were glazed but amazingly held no fear. Franco's own panic abated slightly, and she slid down beside him, offering what little support she could. Kirk grasped her arm, struggling to draw air but with little success. His eyes widened, disbelief showing. He managed to rasp in a hoarse whisper, "Can't . . . breathe."

And within seconds, Kirk collapsed, Akemi helplessly supporting his limp body.

Spock extracted McCoy from Eliza Broderman's clutches, only to find himself waylaid by an Ambassador that had visited once at his home on Vulcan. It had not taken long to locate the doctor, but managing to cross the crowded room full of dignitaries had been difficult. His sense of unease, however illogical, was growing stronger by the second.

As he turned to acknowledge the Andorian at his side, a chill of foreboding rushed through the Vulcan suddenly and he outwardly shivered.

McCoy touched his arm, "Spock?"

Fear for Kirk paralyzed him for a precious second. He pulled free from McCoy's tightening grip on him and strode rapidly away, calling for McCoy to hurry. Vaguely he felt the ambassador's surprised stare but his concern was for Kirk.

McCoy caught up with him as he entered the garden, the doctor running to keep pace with his rapid strides. A scream for help shattered the peacefulness of the garden and McCoy faltered, whispering, "Jim."

Spock ran the last few meters of the pathway, fighting a losing battle with his raging emotions. He knew the boundary between life and death was so fragile with humans; they did not have the inherent healing abilities to cope with illness that many other species did. Spock sensed that Kirk was sliding past that boundary of life and death just as he had slid past the boundary of friendship and brotherhood with his Vulcan first officer. Life. Death. Brothers. Love. The words swirled incomprehensibly in his mind as he strained to see Kirk through the thick bushes.

He rounded a curve, skidding to a stop, McCoy right behind him. Several station personnel had come apparently in answer to Franco's call for help. They were gathered around the bench, blocking Spock's view of Kirk. At Spock and McCoy's arrival they backed away. Kirk was sprawled on the bench, Lt. Franco knelt on the ground beside him. His face was bluish gray.

Lifeless.

Franco turned a blotchy white face towards them. "Where were you? He couldn't breathe. He . . ." She broke off, sobbing.

His tightly leashed control snapped and Spock pushed the Lieutenant out of the way. Flames of emotion flared, driving away all his years of training with one searing motion.

Spock lifted Kirk's limp body, supporting him in his arms. His hand slid without volition to Kirk's face, positioning his fingers firmly on the pale cheek.

"Spock! What the hell do you think you're doing?" McCoy was kneeling at Kirk's side, blue eyes blazing. "Let me help him!"

Spock shoved the doctor aside, his mind swirling with raging red furor. He pressed his fingers firmly, reaching for the fragile shell of life. Reaching for Kirk. He would fight death itself to save him.

"Spock! Dammit, I can help him!" McCoy's fear pulled him back. "He's in shock! Spock!"

A thread of reason parted the red mists enabling the Vulcan to resist brushing McCoy away again as the doctor pulled at Spock's hands. He froze, regaining a small measure of control, fingers poised rigidly above Kirk's face for a fraction of a second. Dropping his hands, Spock met McCoy's angry eyes. "Help him."

McCoy injected a hypo into Kirk's neck. Almost immediately Kirk gasped, fighting to breathe. Spock supported his shoulders, numbly watching the ashen face struggle to survive.

The small oxygen unit was slapped into Spock's palm while McCoy fumbled in his medical pouch, pulling out his small scanner and a second vial of liquid.

"No good, dammit. Shock, widespread . . . bacterial. We've got to get him to some support." McCoy ran the scanner once over his chest, the blue eyes intent but amazingly calm. Spock drew strength from them, steadying his own racing heart. He waited as McCoy injected Kirk and then stood, gathering Kirk up in his arms.

Before they could move, Lt. Franco shouted, "Mr. Spock, look. Kate!"

Dr. Donar was coming down the path in front of them with several med-techs at her side. McCoy glanced back at Kirk in Spock's arms and echoed the Vulcan's own relief by whispering, "Thank god!"

Kirk was struggling to breathe, the infrequent gasps increasingly weak. As Spock leaned over to lay him on the stretcher the med-techs produced, Kirk gripped his arms, his eyes suddenly wide open. Spock attempted to ease him down, loosening one of the clutching hands to grip it tightly in his own. And for a moment the hazel eyes met his, the barest whisper of a smile appearing so briefly Spock thought he had imagined it.

Kirk's eyelids slid closed, the hand clutching his arm falling limply off the stretcher. Time resumed its normal proportion, medical personnel were swarming around him to get to Kirk. A hand tugged on his arm inundating him with unwanted emotions.

"Spock." It was McCoy. Spock resisted for a moment, then moved aside to let the doctor assist the medical team.

In less than fifty-four seconds, they had the captain on the portable life support and began moving him to the med-central area. Spock followed behind the team, catching occasional glimpses of Kirk's face. He had not regained consciousness, the face pale and blank.

He could not control a shudder as he recalled the smile Kirk had given him. It had felt as if Kirk had whispered his name to his very soul.

As if Kirk was telling him good bye.



Hours later, Spock watched as McCoy paced the large waiting room outside the Intensive Care Unit. The doctor stopped and looked up as Ravel approached, moving to stand directly in front of him, Lt. Franco at his side.

"As long as you abide by Dr. Donar's requests, then I will not interfere. I trust additional measures will not be necessary?"

McCoy shook his head wordlessly. The young Lieutenant touched McCoy's arm, trying to reassure him.

"Kate will do her best, he's in good hands." Franco smiled, but McCoy only looked at her, his face oddly blank.

The Admiral and Lt. Franco left, obligated to return to close the celebration. Unfortunately, they did not take the angry tension that was almost palpable in the waiting room with them.

McCoy began to pace again, his steps leading him closer and closer to the entrance of the ICU. Spock stood in silence, attempting to ignore the doctor's anger, his eyes focused on the door that led to Kirk.

The medical team, headed by Dr. Donar, had proved to be totally efficient. However, Spock had noticed a distinct difference in their teamwork. Rather than working fluidly together as he had watched McCoy's crew function, the medical personnel did nothing without obtaining Donar's permission first. Strictly by procedure, yet Spock found this lack of initiative and trust disturbing. Especially in light of the fact that within their first five minutes in Med-Central, Dr. Donar had ordered McCoy and Spock from the room. The confrontation had been lost when Admiral Ravel had arrived and backed up her authority.

So they were forced to wait outside, with no word on how Kirk was doing. While McCoy raved on, Spock was left with time to consider his total loss of control. He should meditate before attempting to understand why he had allowed his emotions to dictate his actions earlier. The logical action now would be for him to return to his quarters until he received some word on the captain's condition. He was serving no purpose here. But the Vulcan could not force himself to leave until he could see Jim. Illogical. His behavior was a disgrace.

"Spock, how can you stand there so calmly? I know Jim's medical condition forwards and backwards. I should be in there!" McCoy faced him angrily.

"Starfleet Regulation one twenty-three, article B states the primary medical authority . . . "

"Regulations! I don't give a damn about regulations! You could be a damn computer for all you care. Don't give me that! I'm a doctor and he's my friend. Yours too if you'd unbend your stubborn ass enough to admit it." McCoy's face twisted and he turned away abruptly. His breathing was harsh in the silence.

Leaning against the wall furthest away from Spock, he shook his head. "I suppose you agree with Donar about his medical care. It was illogical to allow him to continue working. I knew he was a walking time bomb and yet I let him . . . why didn't he tell me he was feeling this bad?" McCoy threw himself down on a nearby couch. His words were nearly inaudible. "One simple scan and I would have caught that infection in time."

Predictable behavior for a human. Self-flagellation. And yet Spock felt the need to reassure McCoy. Donar had intimated Kirk's condition was a direct result of the doctor's previous care. "As I recall, the captain overrode your recommendation to rest. You requested a scan before we left the Enterprise which he also refused. And his condition is caused by a combination of stresses that neither you or I could prevent." Spock remained where he was, finally turning his gaze from the ICU door to McCoy's weary form.

"How do you think that makes me feel? Playing with his life? Letting him make the decisions. I, most of all, knew the consequences, except I was taken in by his display of invincibility along with the rest of the crew. Somewhere I lost sight of the simple fact that Jim Kirk is a man. Ironical how you can lose yourself in one person's persona and now . . . " McCoy laughed humorously, the sound turning into more of a strangled sob. "I'm afraid we're going to lose him." The anguished words were whispered and Spock knew McCoy had not meant for his sensitive ears to hear them.

"Short of restraining him, I do not believe you could have held the captain in sickbay while his ship was in jeopardy. Without Captain Kirk's leadership, his constant encouragement and efforts, the odds of us returning would have been lowered by thirty point three percent."

McCoy lifted his head, his face revealing the depth of grief he was experiencing but traces of affection crossed his features. "You underrate yourself Mr. Spock. I don't . . . "

The door behind them slid open and both men turned quickly. A crisp nurse nodded at them. "Dr. Donar is allowing you to see him for a moment."

The life support had been removed, and Kirk was positioned on his side facing them, head raised slightly, eyes closed.

Kate Donar stood at the foot of the bed. She held up a hand, forestalling the barrage of questions from McCoy. "He's stable, should improve throughout the night. I will give you medical details in my office. We're going to keep him under for at least the next twenty-four hours. Rest is vital, as you very well know."

Under the dark stare, McCoy's face flushed. Spock tensed beside him. No purpose was served to remind McCoy of the role he had played in Kirk's collapse.

Spock tentatively touched McCoy's arm, meeting the startled blue eyes steadily. McCoy, better than most, knew the reason he avoided physical contact. Spock had never reached out to McCoy before except when necessary in the line of duty.

McCoy swallowed and then turned his gaze back to Kirk. Spock did the same, and seeing the frown lines present on Kirk's face, he questioned softly. "He is not in pain?"

"His dolorimeter reading is at zero." Donar supplied.

McCoy reached out, covering Kirk's limp hand with his own. "Jim, Spock and I are here. You're in good hands. Hang in there."

McCoy brushed Kirk's hair back from his forehead, offering human comfort that was denied the Vulcan. Yet Spock found himself desiring to touch Kirk as well, to offer his own bit of comfort.

Instead, he locked his hands behind his back and retreated several steps. Now that he knew Captain Kirk was safe, it was time to deal with these lapses in control.

And yet, with each soothing stroke of McCoy's hands on Kirk's softly curling hair, Spock discovered a new human emotion. Resentment. Resentment that it was McCoy and not he who was offering comfort.

He turned away. Meditation was required. No longer just a desire but a necessity to regain the control he was fast losing.

Without a word, Spock left the room.



Spock lay in the total darkness of the quarters assigned to him. The room was small but adequate. With several ships in port, space was at a premium. He could have retired to his quarters aboard the Enterprise, have Scott send a shuttle, but somehow he had been unable to bring himself to do

that. Something — someone held him here and he found that thought disturbing indeed. He fought an illogical need to pace and meditation seemed a solution beyond his grasp.

He shied away from facing the truth behind his attempted mind meld with Jim Kirk in the garden. His actions had been totally governed by his emotions. Vulcan emotion, not human.

Spock lifted his hand to rub his forehead, but stopped in midair. Even in the darkness, he knew it was trembling.

He curled the hand into a fist and slammed it unsatisfyingly down on the bed. He was a Vulcan! He would control. Spock stood in one fluid motion, intending to seek out a trance to assist his meditation efforts.

Both hands trembled as he placed them together. As his fingers lightly touched, he saw not his own flesh but Kirk's face as he had reached for the meld. He could try to fool himself that his motivation through the raging emotions at the time was to save Kirk's life. But lurking below was the knowledge that he had wanted to meld for personal reasons, to touch Jim's mind for perhaps the first and last time. And beyond that, a surging warrior's right to protect his . . .

"Kroykah!"

Spock locked his shaking hands together, his sudden roar of rage echoing around the room.

Image after image ran through his mind, a continuous loop of memory playing havoc with his well ordered thoughts: Kirk in his quarters, recuperating from the accident, Kirk, in his arms, lying pale and still in the banquet hall garden, Kirk grasping his hand, reaching out to Spock with his smile. Kirk. All the images were Kirk.

His breath slowed as he called upon every resource in his mind to break the loop. To free himself of this overwhelming emotion would require his reestablishing all his Vulcan control, expunging any emotion. Denying himself any friendship he felt for Kirk.

Spock closed his eyes, it would also deny Kirk the relationship the human desired with him. He would have to be prepared for the pain Kirk would feel at his rejection. But the captain did not understand that there was no concept of friendship as such on Vulcan and Spock now had firsthand experience to back up his reason. The very nature of Vulcans, the innate violence from their savage history made the concept impossible. One was either mate or family, all others were mere acquaintances. Any other relationship could ultimately endanger someone's life just as his loss of control and interference in allowing McCoy to treat Jim in the garden earlier could have cost Kirk his life.

Spock resolutely knelt, focusing intently on his hands. He started his descent into the lower levels, desperate to regain some of his control.

A soft, chiming sound interrupted him before he reached the first level. It was the com line on the desk across the room. A sudden chill of fear swept over him. Was Jim worse? He was on his feet and across the room in two strides. Waving up the lights, he sat and reached a trembling hand to open the line.

Ravel's silvery-gray bearded face filled the screen. "Mr. Spock! I'm sorry to bother you at this ungodly hour of the morning but a situation has come up that requires your expertise."

"Commodore, I . . . " Spock began.

"Hear me out, Commander. The agricomputers on Pollux Three have failed. If not repaired quickly, the entire planet's crops could fail. Millions would starve."

In the flash of time it took Ravel to draw a breath, Spock considered refusing his request. He could not leave Jim . . . the enormity of what he was thinking, of putting the importance of his feelings for James Kirk over his duty froze him. And in the same flash of time, he knew that if he gave into his desires in this, all of Vulcan would be lost to him.

"I will report to you in thirty minutes, Commodore. Spock out."

He closed the line and stood, shutting away all vestiges of the emotions he had been experiencing. Squaring his shoulders he left the room and headed for the Med-Central.

The walk was a short one and he was able to keep his mind clear and orderly.

Though the hour was early, Dr. Donar was in her office across the corridor from Kirk's room. She looked up from her viewscreen as he entered.

"Good morning, Mr. Spock. You're up and about very early."

He ignored the pleasantry. "I am leaving within minutes on a mission to Pollux Three. I do not know how long I shall be gone."

She stood, a tiny smile playing about her lips, a reaction quite unexpected. It unnerved him somehow.

"You're leaving?"

"Yes, but before I do so, I wanted to check on Captain Kirk's condition."

The answer came quickly. Too quickly?

"He's resting and I see no reason at all for you to be concerned. Would you care to see him before you go?"

The unexpected question shook him out of his neatly built fortress of Vulcan rectitude. There was nothing he wanted more and nothing which was more impossible.

He realized the doctor was studying him as if he were a specimen under a microscope. Her eyes were cold, impassive, the smile on her lips seemed false, though he could assign no real reason for such a reaction to her.

"I . . . no, thank you, Doctor. I must report to the Commodore immediately." He turned to go. Donar's voice reached him at the door.

"Tell John I look forward to dinner with him this evening."

The simple statement sent a cold chill down his spine. Was he losing his sanity? He had never thought such things, felt such things in his life. There must be an end to it.

The alien who reported to Commodore Ravel was more Vulcan than any being had a right to be. And he intended to keep it that way.



Kirk was drowning. He knew it was a dream. He had had the same nightmare ever since he was a small child. The nightmares had started after an accident when playing with a boyhood friend in Iowa. Travis had nearly died when he'd fallen through broken ice into the water. With Sam's help, they had managed to save him, but Kirk had never been unable to forget those few seconds under the ice grasping Travis' hand only to find he could not escape himself. Sam had pulled them to safety.

Now, it was he who was alone, he who was drowning. Pressure built as Kirk searched frantically for a way through the ice. Coughing and choking, he took a breath filled with the icy pond water and knew that he was going to die.

"Spock!" He rasped, reaching for that solid comfort he knew would be waiting patiently at his side. The silence that met his call snapped his eyes open. He pulled at restraints tying his arms to the bed, struggling to sit up, confused that he was no longer underwater and yet still feeling as if he was. Kirk drew a labored breath, wondering who was making that horrible rattling sound. He fought for another breath, his heart pounding in his ears with the effort. Another futile breath did nothing to relieve the feeling he was breathing water, and he realized with horror the ominous rasp he heard was his own lungs as he attempted to breathe.

Kirk blinked, forcing himself to concentrate on his surroundings. His panic lessened when he discovered he was in sickbay. "Bones?" he whispered, wondering why McCoy was not with him.

There was no reply, only the muted sounds of the monitor above his head. Feeling his terror gaining hold of him as he fought to breathe, he tried again. "Bones? Spock!"

The words brought on a bout of coughing, which threatened to drown him. Pain exploded in his chest and then there was blessed darkness.

Only one plea followed him down. "Spock . . . help me."



Dr. Kate Donar stood at Captain Kirk's bedside, waiting for him to awaken. Her thoughts drifted back over the few hours he had been in her sickbay. She had seen the Vulcan's face and McCoy's when they thought that Kirk would not live. Spock probably thought he concealed what amounted to stark terror for a Vulcan. And McCoy — the good doctor had been nearly frantic with worry and guilt. And by the gods he should feel guilty. Due to his mismanagement, Kirk had almost died.

The plan had begun then. Some niggling little thought of how they would be hurt if Kirk died. Causing the Vulcan pain was neither here nor there to her, but McCoy — McCoy was living the life she should be living. If Kirk died, there would be a new captain on the Enterprise. And with McCoy charged with negligence ultimately resulting in Kirk's death, it would leave an opening for CMO of the Enterprise. Maybe she would have her chance after all.

As the hours passed, the plan coalesced in her mind, became real, possible, and more attractive moment to moment. She had rejected out of hand killing Kirk outright. McCoy must be made to suffer as long as possible as she had suffered years of anger and rejection, always feeling second best. Now it was McCoy's turn.

Impatiently, she reached out and increased the counteragent for the sedative he was receiving, not caring that it would increase his agitation when he was fully conscious.

Watching the medpanel, Kate's fingers hesitated near the oxygen input valve. If she decreased it a notch it would increase his discomfort but not seriously damage him. Donar adjusted the valve, pleased to see his eyelids were fluttering as she watched him from the corner of her eye.

"Dr. Donar?" A timid voice spoke from behind her.

Kate froze for a microsecond and then moved her arm casually from the medpanel. She had not heard the nurse approaching, and she was sure the door had been security encoded and locked.

"Lt. Tripp. What is the meaning of this? You were instructed not to enter without my order."

Kirk was moaning behind her, his breathing rasping louder. Donar moved sideways, intending to obstruct Tripp's view of the patient.

"I realize that, sir." Tripp was normally a quiet, little mouse. Donar had expected no trouble from her. "I thought you might need someone to spell you for a while. You haven't requested any food and I doubt you've rested."

"I am capable of calling for assistance when I need it, Lieutenant. Your concern is appreciated but not necessary. You will leave. Now."

A definite frown was crossing Tripp's face. She shifted a few steps to the side, obtaining an unobstructed view of Kirk, watching his increasingly difficult struggle to breathe with narrowed eyes. The brown eyes that Donar had always thought of as meek, met her own eyes with unexpected defiance. "Dr. Donar, I don't understand why we are not allowed to assist in his care."

Kate did not doubt the trace of suspicion she heard. She had forgotten the Lieutenant was usually compliant unless it involved a patient's care. Then she was a most formidable patient advocate.

She shook her head, giving the Lieutenant a brief smile. "Dorothy, I didn't want to let this out but I see you need to know . . . the captain and I . . ." She paused, dropping her eyes for effect, resting a hand on Kirk's arm. "We were very special to one another several years ago and I just can't bear to let anyone else take care of him. Just let me see him through this crisis, it shouldn't be much longer. He's been hallucinating some and is paranoid at times. Since he trusts me, I think it's better if it's only me who cares for him right now." Donar drew her voice down to a whisper. "Can you understand why I want to do this? I'd never forgive myself if he didn't make it."

Lt. Tripp smiled, her brown eyes concerned, caring. "Of course. None of us had any idea. Will you let us help?"

Kate shook her head, keeping her attention on Kirk's restless form. "You can best help by keeping visitors out until I indicate he's better."

"Yes, sir."

The Lieutenant's footsteps retreated and Donar waited until she heard the door slide closed behind Tripp before she straightened from Kirk's side.

"So, my dear captain, you even manage to turn my nurses against me." He voice tightened in anger. "Open your eyes, Jim Kirk. It's time to wake up."

The glazed eyes slowly focused, his arms trembling in his attempt to sit up.

"Can't breathe . . . " Fully awake now, Kirk moved almost wildly in the bed. He gasped with each breath, fiercely trying to get the oxygen he so desperately needed. There was an ominous rattling in his lungs, causing him to cough painfully.

Donar watched his struggles, unmoved by his agony. It was too bad McCoy wasn't here to see him, then she could watch him suffer at the same time. Dwelling on that sudden thought, Kate focused on Kirk's face in time to notice he was turning almost purple.

Almost reluctantly she increased the oxygen level and then efficiently used a tube to remove the mucus that was blocking Kirk's airway.

The captain drew in air, collapsing back on the bed, his face shocky white, his whole body trembling.

Amazing how hard his abdominal muscles had to work to keep breathing, even when he was asleep. Donar wondered how long the muscles could hold out under the strain.

"Need air . . . Can't . . . " Kirk broke off, lifting his head again to search the room frantically, panic surfacing in his eyes. "Where's Bones?"

"Shhh," Donar placed a hand on his arm. "You're making it worse. Breathe slowly." She lifted a hypo. "I'll give you something to make it easier."

Within minutes of the injection, Kirk's breathing eased, a tinge of pink showing in his pale cheeks.

"Better?"

Kirk lifted tired eyes to meet hers, the corner of his mouth managing to curve up. "Yes. Thank you."

Kate smiled back, a practiced smile that she had perfected long ago. Despite his fatigue, a teasing glint appeared in the hazel eyes. "Think . . . I'll tell McCoy . . . I want you as . . . my angel of mercy. You're much . . . prettier."

Donar laughed politely in response, wondering if he could see the anger flashing in her eyes. Did Kirk think she would fall under the spell he seemed to weave around everyone he met? She turned from his gaze, focusing on her scanner, running it briefly over him, already knowing the results.

"So . . . will I live?" Kirk rasped.

Kate frowned, "You're very compromised, I can't make any promises." She watched the hazel eyes meet hers in surprise. Was he shocked to find out he was not invincible? "I've had to drain your lungs twice and may have to put a temporary drain in. Your ability to take in oxygen and utilize it is severely hampered. That is why you feel air hungry. The shot I just gave you will only have a short term effect. To recuperate, if it's possible at all, will require your complete rest and cooperation."

Kirk nodded. "Does McCoy agree? Where is . . ." he broke off, coughing, the fluid in his chest rumbling audibly.

Donar watched him. Kirk was literally drowning in his own secretions.

After several minutes, Kirk dropped his head back on the pillow, his face tight. He rubbed his chest with a trembling arm. The continuous battle to breathe continued. Kate knew he had to be in pain, but he did not admit to it.

"Where's . . . McCoy? Keep . . . expect . . . him . . . Spock."

The doctor adjusted Kirk's intravenous line before answering. "Dr. McCoy has relinquished all your care to me. He has been busy preparing to ship out with the Enterprise."

"Ship out? What about . . ." The hazel eyes flashed open angrily but then he choked, coughing again. His face twisted in pain, and his hands gripped the sides of the bed until the knuckles were white.

Kate watched as he fought the cough, managing to suppress the spasms racking his body, and again turned a pale but composed face towards her. The fury darkening his eyes pushed Donar back a half step before she realized what she was doing.

"Where is Spock?"

The whispered command grated on Donar's nerves. She had to force herself to sound regretful.

"He's not here. I understand Mr. Spock left the base on a personal errand."

Confusion clouded Kirk's handsome features. The eyelids fluttered over his bewildered eyes, the face growing slack as the sedative in his IV took effect as she had intended. Still he struggled against it. "Don't understand . . . my ship. Who's comman . . . ding . . ."

Donar smiled, leaning over to whisper in his ear. "Mr. Spock has agreed to take command of the Enterprise."

The struggle to open his eyes was lost, but Kirk shook his head, his mouth barely forming the soundless whisper, "No!"

She continued the insidious murmurings. "Your friends are leaving you here. Dr. McCoy, Mr. Scott, and Mr. Spock are all leaving you. And your dear friend Akemi helped get the ship repaired quickly so they could leave you that much sooner, Captain Kirk."

She studied him, satisfied that his subconscious mind had listened to the message of betrayal. The frown lines in his forehead and the continued struggle to breathe indicated he was still fighting the strong sedative enough to have heard her.

Kate Donar gazed down at him, touching his forehead almost tenderly. She felt happier than she had in a long time. For once, someone else was going to suffer instead of her. She would have McCoy come and visit and see what good care she was taking of his friend. The brilliant doctor should suffer for the critical condition of Captain Kirk. Humming almost gaily to herself, Kate set about readjusting the life panel gauges above Kirk's head. He was receiving a higher saline solution than was normal, but she could not allow the gauges to reflect the concentration or McCoy might think she was trying to increase his sodium level. Then he could accuse her of lowering his lung capacity by increasing his fluid

retention, and Donar couldn't have that. Wouldn't do for him to accuse her of poor care. It had to appear Kirk was getting the best care possible. Satisfied with the readouts, she updated an entry on his official medical condition.

Donar studied Kirk for a moment, tapping her chin thoughtfully. She had told Lt. Tripp he was paranoid. Perhaps . . . the doctor picked up her personal medikit, taking out a cylinder. Hallucinations and paranoia were easy to cause with a certain combination of drugs.

"Pleasant dreams." She almost giggled as the hypo hissed against his arm. Poor McCoy, if he'd only taken better care of his captain.



Dr. Donar retreated to her office, keeping Kirk on her monitor screen. The nurse sitting at his side had been chosen with care. One who did not question orders, and was not overly bright in the area of general medicine.

She had only taken a few bites of the crepe she had ordered when McCoy appeared at her door. He entered, coming to stand directly across from her, his blue eyes frosty with anger.

"Dr. Donar, thank you for deigning to see me." His barely concealed sarcasm amused her. He would have his comeuppance soon enough. "Will you tell me how the captain is this morning? No one else seems inclined to do so."

Donar's eyebrows rose, inclining her head just slightly. "Good morning to you, Doctor. I certainly appreciate your promptness. Although my staff informs me you have been underfoot most of the night." She watched in secret delight as McCoy gritted his teeth, not surprised when she heard a low growl. "My staff, as with any patient here, are simply protecting the patient's right to confidentiality. I would think you would be the first to commend their professionalism."

Kate took a sip of her orange juice, savoring the apparent struggle McCoy was having to control his rage. It had been the right move to deny him any privileges in her ward.

"I'm his physician, how can that be a breach of confidence?" McCoy snapped.

"On the contrary, I am Captain Kirk's physician, and therein lies the problem. Now is a good example. If we're arguing here, imagine how will it affect my patient's recovery if we can't agree on his treatment?"

McCoy's face reddened and his voice was deceptively soft. "This is insane. You don't have the right to deny me admittance to at least see Captain Kirk."

Kate blinked slowly and deliberately, a smile playing about her lips. "In the best interest of my patient, I can deny anyone admittance if I feel it is detrimental to his or her recovery."

Differing expressions crossed McCoy's face delighting Kate to no end. She could jerk McCoy around as much as she wanted, and he could do nothing about it.

"You . . ." he started. "Hell, there's no point in talking to you. I warn you, I will be allowed to follow the captain's case. I intend to talk to Starfleet Command if need be, and if you think you can keep Spock away from Jim . . ."



Kate raised her dark eyebrows in undisguised delight. McCoy did not know Spock was gone. She interrupted firmly, "If your first officer were here, he would remind you that threats are illogical. But, if you really want to push your luck, you may find yourself facing a board of inquiry before I finish with you."

At McCoy's narrowed eyes, she added, "I have spoken to Admiral Ravel of your part in the captain's collapse, and it is on the official record that his improper care is the cause."

The doctor's expression didn't change. "My care is not the issue, your care of Captain Kirk is. Refusing to allow him the comfort of his closest friends, especially Mr. Spock, is not in his best interest."

Kate smiled, changing the course of the discussion. "Obviously, you aren't aware that Mr. Spock has left the base. I believe it was 0200 this morning when he came to tell me he was leaving on a priority mission."

McCoy could not disguise the shock he felt, his face suddenly appearing haggard. Kate did not try to hide her own amusement. For once, she was coming out ahead of McCoy.

It took him a moment to recover, nodding slightly to himself. Finally he dropped his hands to the top of the chair in front of him. His tone was quiet.

"Dr. Donar . . . Kate, I'm asking you to let me see the captain, as his friend." He paused, drawing a breath. "I swear to you, I will not interfere with his medical care."

"Unless?" Donar watched his face carefully. "Suppose you feel his medical treatment is blatantly wrong?"

She was managing to anger him again. Donar watched his growing frustration with amusement.

"What kind of question is that? We are physicians, sworn to care for all life forms. You would be duty bound to do anything you could to make sure a patient received the best care possible. I couldn't ignore an error that could endanger any patient's life whether it's the captain or not."

McCoy stared at her accusingly, his blue eyes flashing. He was so preponderantly self-righteous. How she wanted to make him pay. To see those blue eyes humble.

"By your very argument, you invalidate yourself as a candidate to see the captain." She said smoothly. "I was not suggesting an error or anything endangering Captain Kirk's life, but that you may interpret the treatment as wrong. I have studied your record, and have spoken to our staff psychologist and he concurs that it is not in Captain Kirk's best interests that you see him." She watched as a combination of angry disbelief and finally fear crossed McCoy's face. "However, my word is final and I called you hear to see how he responds to a visit by you. If the captain experiences any distress by your visit, then you will not be allowed to return."

McCoy watched her carefully, seeming to not quite believe he had heard her correctly. He turned to leave, a smile finally forming. "Thank you, Dr. Donar."

Kate waited until he was almost to the door. "Not yet."

McCoy stopped, turning around with a frozen expression on his face. Donar smiled, enjoying this game of cat and mouse.

"When?" the deadly calm voice rasped.

"Wait outside. I'll let you know."

Donar watched the effect her words had on McCoy, relishing the myriad display of emotions. She had to admire his control, though, and the fact that he was coming to realize she was pulling the strings now. McCoy's voice was angry but quiet. "I'll be waiting at your convenience."

Donar almost chuckled as he strode angrily out the door. He nearly toppled Lt. Franco, who was waiting to come in.

Kate quickly composed her face. Franco approached, glancing back over her shoulder with a frown.

"What's wrong with Dr. McCoy?"

"Nothing," Donar shrugged. "Just a little difference of opinion."

"I didn't mean to barge in. Is it all right if I see you for a few minutes? Semiofficial?"

Donar smiled, still amused at McCoy's reactions, wishing she could include Akemi in on her plans.

The Lieutenant sat in the chair across from her. For just a moment her eyes strayed to the half finished crepe on Donar's desk, then rose to meet Kate's. "You look like you're in a good mood this morning. I figured you were up most of the night with Captain Kirk."

"I was."

"So, don't keep me in suspense, how is he doing?" Franco gave her pert smile, suddenly not appearing as charming to Kate as before.

"Now, Akemi, you know I can't give out confidential information."

The lighter blue eyes widened in surprise. "I'm not asking for details, just general condition. Besides, it's not for me. I need a press release for General Ravel's office."

Once again, Kate felt herself losing something she cared deeply about. First, it had been a place on the Enterprise, now it was Akemi's friendship. Well, she was tired of being the loser, the one everyone pitied. She would be in control this time. Something in her heart turned to stone and what had only been an idle daydream of revenge became the only course of action open to her. Beginning now.

Akemi had become one of "them". Her loyalty now belonged to those who had hurt her and Kate had a sudden urge to hurt Akemi as well as McCoy. She could damn well wait for the official report just like everyone else.

"I will put out a report within the hour for your office." Watching Akemi frown, Donar added. "I've had so many requests for information on his condition, it wouldn't be fair if I gave you what I've refused to give to anyone else, would it?"

Franco shook her head, her eyes glued to Donar's face, puzzlement showing. "No, I guess not. Can you tell me if he's out of danger?"

I haven't decided yet, Kate thought, biting back the words. "It's too early to tell. I will tell you that he wouldn't be in this condition if McCoy had treated him properly. Our galactic hero very nearly died last night due to the mismanagement of his care. There would be absolutely no reason for him to be this ill if McCoy had treated his injury properly at first."

Franco glanced back at the door where McCoy had been. "I hadn't realized . . . "

"No one does, I have to take care of the captain first and then I will address McCoy's gross negligence of care. As of now, he is totally restricted from Kirk's case, which is why he was so angry." Donar paused thoughtfully, "I've heard for years how temperamental he is, but I didn't realize he was careless too."

"Knowing his reputation, that's practically impossible to believe." Franco stated.

Donar nodded. "I know. Probably if we backtrack we'll find a history of covered negligence, and I intend to check the records when I have time. Until then, this must be kept totally confidential."

Franco nodded, "Of course."

Donar took another bite of crepe, noticing Akemi's forlorn glance at her plate. Smiling sadly at her shapely friend, Kate scooted her dish containing an untouched portion of crepe across her desk. "Poor Akemi, if you didn't worry about fitting into that jumpsuit, you could enjoy this."

Akemi flashed an irritated look at Donar. "Why is it I have to watch everything I eat to stay this weight and you eat practically anything you want and not gain a kilo? Besides, I don't understand why you wear clothes that don't show off your figure. You looked absolutely fabulous last night. If you hadn't been with the Admiral, I know there were several interested suitors, including Captain Kirk."

Donar could not quite control her irritation with Franco. Here was more proof that Kirk had already managed to swing her to his camp. So much for new friends. "It didn't take him long to charm you, did it?"

Akemi's wide blue eyes reflected her hurt at the sharp words. "That's another reason I wanted to see you this morning. I wanted to make sure you weren't mad at me. I felt as if you were. Captain Kirk was absolutely wonderful last night. You did realize that speech he gave was totally ad lib. It was not the one I reviewed with him. And the short time I got to spend with him, I found him surprisingly sensitive and caring."

"And you discovered all this in one night? You believe him?" Donar could not keep the scorn out of her voice.

"Kate!" Akemi shook her head in exasperation. "You can't tell me you didn't experience his charisma, his genuineness. He's a good person." She paused, glancing up at her friend.

Donar remembered her reaction to Kirk almost angrily. Her resentment and anger at McCoy included anyone who was friends with the doctor. Kirk had forced her to experience his charm and somehow that made her resentment worse.

"And what about my friend, Janice, who also believed he was a good person for over a year, until he hurt her? He was heartless and cruel, because she didn't serve his purpose anymore. He's got what he wanted now, and she's still broken hearted. And you think you know him after one evening's romantic walk in the moonlight?"

Akemi sat very still for a long moment. There was a stiff silence before she said softly. "I'd forgotten about your friend. I know that hurt you as much as her." She looked down, glancing almost nervously back at Kate. "I have to go. Admiral Ravel is expecting me. We still have the events scheduled today despite the captain's illness." Franco stood, "I would appreciate that notice on Captain Kirk for the briefing of department heads scheduled at 1000 hours."

Donar watched Franco's retreat, knowing she had angered the Lieutenant. She left without her usual cheery wave.

Kate's earlier thoughts returned. History just kept repeating itself. It seemed anything she cherished, whether acknowledgments, awards, achievements, career advancement, and now valued friends, was just beyond her reach, and went directly into McCoy's grasp.

Her fingers drummed on the desk. It was definitely time to take something cherished from Dr. Leonard McCoy. From them all.



The windows outside Kirk's ICU unit were opaque and the door was security encoded. McCoy paced back and forth in front of the windows, at times stopping to stare at the clouded windows as if magically they would clear and he would be able to at least see Kirk. His fear and frustration was growing with each step. It was an ever increasing struggle with the passing minutes to keep himself from storming back into Donar's office and literally force her into opening Kirk's door.

He considered the idea of slipping briefly away and back to Admiral Ravel's office to try to make him understand his concern. McCoy had gone there before coming to med central early this morning but the Admiral had not been available. Ravel's aide had been unimpressed with McCoy's badgering, refusing to give out Ravel's location or schedule.

McCoy shook his head, staring again at the opaque windows. He rejected the idea of leaving even for a moment; he was certain Donar would not give him a second chance to see Jim.

"Damn," McCoy rested his fingertips against the glass, leaning his forehead slowly to touch the cool material. "Jim-boy, we're here. Just hang in there," he whispered, his stomach twisting in fear. It was simply unbelievable that he was out here, denied all privileges to even see Captain Kirk. Yesterday, when he had told Spock he was afraid Kirk might be grounded, McCoy had never imagined that twenty-four hours later he would fear for Jim's life.

Footsteps approached, and McCoy straightened hopefully as a young Lieutenant came to his side.

"Dr. McCoy, I'm Dr. Joel Levine. I thought you might like some coffee while you're waiting. If you'll follow me . . ."

"I'm not interested in coffee. I just want to see Captain Kirk. Now if you really want to help, could you get me in there?" McCoy tried to keep from growling, but was not entirely successful. Dr. Levine took a rapid step backwards.

"I know you're concerned and I understand. I can't help you whether I wanted to or not, the room is security coded and only a select few have been allowed in." Levine frowned, looking at the clouded window. He lifted a hand and gripped McCoy's shoulder momentarily.

"I know it must be frustrating. But I also know Dr. Donar is very good and you can be assured Captain Kirk is getting the best care possible." The nervous young man did not wait for a response, wheeling about and returning the same direction he had come.

"Then why am I so scared?" McCoy whispered. He watched the rapid retreat, his apprehension increasing even more. He glanced around the room in an absurd hope that Spock had appeared. The waiting room was empty.

He had stopped by Spock's room here on the base this morning but when he had not answered McCoy had assumed the Vulcan was here with Jim or on the ship assisting Scotty with repairs. What had caused Spock to leave without explanation?

McCoy began to pace again. He could guess what had happened to the damn Vulcan. Spock had actually experienced a genuine emotion last night and it must have scared his logical half to death. The doctor certainly knew he had been frightened for his own life in those first few moments when they had found Kirk so near death. It made McCoy shudder just to remember, facing the enraged Vulcan to get to Kirk. It was no wonder that at the first opportunity he ran, deserting Jim when he needed him most. Though Spock would have a perfectly logical reason for doing so, McCoy thought bitterly. He had left the doctor to explain his absence to Kirk and McCoy knew one of Jim's first questions would be about Spock.

McCoy whirled at the sound of sliding doors opening into ICU. A short, almost plump nurse stood in the doorway.

"Dr. McCoy? I'm Ensign Osage. If you'll follow me, Dr. Donar has indicated you are allowed to visit now."

Prepared to do battle with Donar, McCoy's mouth opened and closed several times before he could respond. Whatever had made Donar change her mind, he could not begin to imagine. And for the moment he did not care. He took a deep, calming breath and cleared his mind of everything but Jim. Gesturing toward the door that separated him from Kirk, he said softly, "After you, Ensign."

The captain lay on his back, his head raised slightly. His eyes were open but he did not immediately focus on McCoy. They were glazed, and McCoy could not help comparing them to someone who had been drugged. A review of the lifesign panel revealed amazingly normal vital signs. McCoy frowned, grasping a cold pale hand, relieved when his grip was weakly returned.

"Please . . . help me." Kirk struggled to sit up, his eyes roving around the room wildly with a panicky fear that McCoy had never witnessed in those hazel eyes before.

"Jim, I'm here. We're all . . ." He broke off as he realized Kirk was not listening to him.

He was still struggling to get up, frustration at his weakness evident in the tense face. McCoy was familiar with that particular reaction by his captain. It was the horror stricken expression, as if he were seeing something that terrorized him that he could not understand. No medication he was treated with should cause this reaction. He studied the eyes again, becoming more and more suspicious. McCoy glanced back at the Ensign, opening his mouth and then abruptly shutting it. Anything he did in here would only succeed in getting him kicked out and then where would Jim be?

Kirk coughed, grimacing in pain.

"Jim, are you hurting? Jim?" McCoy gripped Kirk's arms, trying to get the captain to respond to him. "Jim, it's Bones. I want you to look at me." Maybe a firm command would reach Kirk.

"Bones," Kirk repeated, blinking in confusion. "Bones . . . Enter . . ." Something was getting through, but his agitation was increasing. He gasped, coughing painfully again and McCoy winced at the sound.

"Slow down Jim. Breathe slowly. I'm here."

"Bones." Disbelieving, Kirk finally looked straight at McCoy, shaking his head. His eyes widened, fear showing as he stared past McCoy. "The fire . . . must get out. Hurry!" His battle to breathe was getting worse, his neck muscles distended with the effort, signs of hypoxia appearing. If this continued, McCoy knew Donar would force him to leave.

"Relax Jim. There is no fire. You're safe." He tried to ease him back on the pillows, slipping his hand around to massage the tense neck muscles.

For the next hour, McCoy stood at his side, alternately reassuring and soothing Kirk, helplessly watching as Kirk suffered physically and from hallucinations. The captain never rested, his eyes darting from one vision to the next, seeing spiders, snakes, Klingons and repeatedly watching the Enterprise in flames.

Kirk was frowning, the hazel eyes staring at McCoy. "Gone . . . said . . . Enterprise, Spock . . . gone."

"No, Jim. Your ship is here. We'll have you back there in no time. You have to try to get well. You need rest." The reassurances rolled off his tongue so easily. McCoy blinked back tears of frustration, his anger becoming increasingly difficult to control.

"No Bones, Donar said . . . the Enterprise was gone." The whispered words were clear, his eyes still focused on McCoy. The doctor gripped Kirk's hand, thinking that he sounded more lucid. There was no edge of fear to the hazel eyes now, they held McCoy's captive as Kirk pleaded. "Bones, don't leave me here. I'm afraid of her."

McCoy gripped his shoulder, "Jim, you're in good hands. Try to remember you're safe. Sometimes it may not seem like it, because you're ill. No one is trying to hurt you."

Kirk shook his head. "No, Bones! Donar . . . she's . . . evil."

McCoy nodded, frowning inwardly. He did not, could not, believe that Donar was deliberately trying to hurt Kirk, but it was obvious she did not have Kirk as stable as she had stated. The paranoia and confusion, even the hallucinations could be explained by a low serum oxygen level, except his life panel showed no critical level that would cause those symptoms. His hand clenched Kirk's shoulder with almost bruising force before he knew it. Donar had some explaining to do whether she wanted his interference or not. For now, he had to reassure Kirk.

"Jim, Kate Donar is not trying to hurt you. You have to do what she says to get well."

Kirk moved restlessly, his eyes closing tiredly. The fight to take each breath required so much of his flagging energy. Too much. Again McCoy's eyes raked the lifesign panel. The oxygen content level simply could not be within normal limits.

"Ensign," he called to Osage who was seated at the computer desk near the door. "The oxygen saturation should be increased, he's becoming increasingly cyanotic."

She smiled benignly, "I'll check with Dr. Donar."

"Damn it! You don't need to check with anyone, I'm telling you this man needs oxygen!"

Both Kirk and the Ensign had jumped at his outburst. McCoy gritted his teeth and strode over to the panel to adjust the controls himself.

"Dr. McCoy, I will take care of the Captain's needs. Leave the panel alone." Donar's voice over the intercom was full of satisfaction.

He had played right into her hands. He drew a slow breath to regain some control and returned to Kirk's side.

Donar came in, joining McCoy on the opposite side of Kirk, hypo in hand. "You're going to have to leave. I was afraid your visit would upset him. We've been able to keep his lung function within acceptable limits until now. He can't tolerate the excitement." She was sympathetic, calming some of McCoy's questions. "Don't worry, I'll give him a sedative after you've gone to help him rest."

"Don't." Kirk's agonized whisper drew both of their eyes.

McCoy grasped his hand, forcing a smile. "Jim, it's all right. You're . . ."

"No," The word came out in a choked sob. Kirk stared at him, the hazel eyes imploring him, begging him. "Don't leave me . . . alone. Bones!"

The hand was trembling in his own. McCoy found he was trembling as well. "Jim . . ." He could not do it, he would not leave Kirk like this. "Kate, let me stay. For him." He lifted his eyes to meet hers, knowing she would see they were full of tears.

There was no sympathy to be found. Cold, black eyes stared back, turning his stomach into a cold pit of fear. She held his for a few seconds, then looked past him. "Escort Dr. McCoy out of Med-Central. Do not allow him to return unless I authorize his visit."

Strong hands pulled his hand free of Kirk's grip and he was forced to walk to the door, accompanied by the two laughing guards from the day before. They were completely sober now, and one look at their faces told McCoy it was useless to try to get them to listen.

He caught a last glimpse of Donar restraining Kirk's arms, his friend's labored breaths accompanying each of his resistant steps.

The guards escorted him outside the Med-Central doors and then firmly posted themselves in front of them.

McCoy glared at them before turning and marching down the corridor. He went immediately to Ravel's office, and was met by a different aide who refused to tell where the Admiral was but did reassure the doctor politely that he would inform Admiral Ravel of McCoy's request for an interview.

The trip back to his base quarters was accomplished without his awareness. Once inside his room, he stood for several long moments, hands clinched into fists at his side.

"Damn," he breathed, giving in and slamming a fist painfully against the wall. Jim was slipping away from them and McCoy seemed to have lost the battle to save him. It had been taken out of his hands. No one here on this godforsaken base was going to help. And help from headquarters would arrive too late. Uhura had sent his message but a reply could take several days.

And where was Spock? Damn Vulcan was never around when he was needed.

McCoy threw himself down on the bunk, covering his eyes with his arms. There had to be an answer, a way to save Jim. Time was running out for all of them and soon, very soon, it would be too late.

If Spock were here, would his reaction be belief of McCoy's fears? McCoy carefully considered the reasons for his concern. It was possible he was overreacting simply because Donar was refusing to allow him to treat the captain.

But he could not shake the memory of Kirk pleading with him and Kate Donar's wicked smile as she bent over him, heartlessly securing the restraints. The smile played constantly in his thoughts, sending a chill to the very depths of his soul.



The fires in Kirk's mind retreated back into the black unreality they had come from. He became aware of a warmth seeping slowly through his veins like a concentrated sunshine. For a brief moment, he basked in the warmth but found it could not dispel the cold knot in his gut that he knew was fear. But what was he afraid of?

From some deep, almost forgotten reservoir, he found the strength to open his eyes. And knew the source of his fear stood beside his bed — Kate Donar. He had seen that look of madness before, more than once, and it froze his very soul. He opened his mouth but no words would come and the action brought a satisfied smile to Kate Donar's face.

"Cat got your tongue, Captain? Actually, it's a very nice little drug that I created myself. Paralyzes the vocal chords quite nicely and leaves no trace to be picked up by the scanner. Quite clever I thought."

She pulled a chair up to the bed and reached out to take his hand. Hers were cold, cold as death, Kirk could not keep the thought from his mind. Donar's voice was low, conspiratorial, as she continued talking.

"I thought it was time we had a talk, Captain, so I brought you back from that lovely place of hallucination where I sent you. Did you enjoy it? No?" She laughed a hollow, mirthless laugh that made Kirk's blood run cold. "That was another of my own creations. It produces hallucinations but leaves no trace in the blood. Quite clever of me, wasn't it? We could have made such a great team, Captain. Much better than the CMO you got stuck with. He took what was mine, you see, but now I'm going to get it back. I never thought I would have the chance but somehow the Fates intervened and here you are. Leonard McCoy cheated me once but he won't get a second chance."

She stood and began pacing the small room, her voice becoming more and more strident and frenzied.

"You should have seen him just now as I did. Weak, helpless, sniveling son of a bitch! Well, he had his way up till now but the great Dr. McCoy is in for a rude awakening. You see, Captain, I must teach him a lesson. He can't take what belongs to another and expect to get away with it. I'm going to make him watch you die, helpless to do anything. And then the Enterprise will need a new captain and I will have the position I should have had all along. I'm sure Leonard won't want to stay aboard with you gone, after all, and I intend to make certain that he is blamed for giving you such poor care that there was just nothing I could do by the time your care was turned over to me. Yes, I'm sure that will work out just fine."

She returned to the chair and took his hand once more. He pulled away as far as the restraint would allow. She laughed, the sound obscene in the stillness of the small room.

"Even your friend Spock cooperated. Admiral Ravel offered him a mission and he couldn't leave fast enough. Seems he doesn't care all that much about you after all." She stood and moved out of his line of vision. He could hear her behind him, humming to herself. When she returned, she held a hypo in her hand and he watched in helpless rage as she added the contents to the intravenous tube in his right arm.

"This will bring the end soon, Captain. Unfortunately, it will not be an easy death but, you see, I want McCoy to suffer as much as possible and the best way to do that is to make you suffer. It really is necessary. You do see that, don't you?"

Kirk could feel the drug make its way through his vein. He became hyper-aware of everything going on around him, burning lungs that ached for air, frozen vocal cords that held unvoiced screams and now this new pain flowing through him, making every muscle clench and contort in agony.

Somehow, he had to get help, make someone aware of what Donar was doing. But how? Something ate at the edges of his mind, some memory, some idea that was almost there, then slipped away. He felt his heart begin to contract painfully. Of course, the heart was a muscle too. He had almost forgotten that. He could feel himself begin to slip away into the pain. There had to be a way. Then the memory came. Spock and Van Gelder, the mind meld. But Spock was not here. And even if he were, how could he make the Vulcan understand that he needed help?

Hopeless. Kate Donar had him completely in her power. He knew now the vague memory of McCoy being threatened and removed by security earlier was not an unpleasant dream as he had hoped it was. Donar, with her mad need for revenge, had him in her clutches and wasn't going to let anyone near him.

The sharp, squeezing agony was reaching into every corner of his being. Kirk pulled at his restraints, opening his mouth in a soundless scream. Laughter sounded from behind him and Kirk locked his jaw against giving her any pleasure from his pain.

It followed him relentlessly, his heart racing erratically against the forced muscle contraction. Aware of the fiery agony in his chest overriding all else, Kirk knew he was going to die soon. No chance to tell those he loved good bye. Bones. Spock.

The thought of Spock brought a soul-rending sense of loss. There had been moments when he had believed that they could share a friendship he had looked for all his life. And now there would be no chance. In his agony and sorrow, Kirk reached for that mind and for the fragile bond that had seemed to stretch between them.

'Spock! Help me!'



The Vulcan was immersed in the intricate coils of the master computer when Kirk's cry reached out to him. He swayed at the unexpected emotional assault to his senses. The mask of his sterile suit fogged with his sudden rasping breaths.

Nerveless hands dropped the tool he was holding. Spock reeled, fighting to retain consciousness. He could not seem to get enough oxygen, the sudden overwhelming pressure in his chest forcing painful, constricted breaths past his dry, irritated throat.

Pain . . . fear . . . Spock sobbed, the agony in his chest vying with the panic he was feeling. Overwhelming . . . can't breathe . . . drowning . . . burning pain . . .

'Spock! Help me!' The cry pierced the Vulcan's rolling confusion. Kirk was dying! It was his panic he was feeling, Jim's tears on his cheeks.

Knowing the source of his incapacitation did not relieve the continuing pain, the lack of oxygen becoming even more acute. And if he was feeling Jim's pain from this impossible distance, how much more was Kirk enduring?

Blindly, he staggered out from behind the computer, feeling his way to the antechamber before ripping away his facemask and gulping in lungfuls of air.

And just as suddenly, the contact was ripped from him, the emptiness more terrifying than the pain. He crashed to his knees, hands crushing his temples.

"Jim!" He reached willingly for their shared rapport, unconcerned with the fear, the closeness and the emotion such a contact intimated. For one eternal second he thought he'd succeeded, a faint thread of Kirk's essence brushing against his own. Spock embraced it eagerly, aware he could not live without Kirk's vibrant warmth.

Blackness filled his grasp, replacing his own soul with a dark gaping hole.

A harsh cry echoed out into the room beyond where tense technicians and planetary officials shifted nervously, waiting for some word from the Vulcan. Surely the noise they had just heard could not have issued from the computer center, only the formidable Vulcan was inside. The Starfleet Officer had appeared nearly two hours before and immediately disappeared within the central core of the computer system, working in silence. It was impossible to imagine this noise issuing from the impeccable figure he had presented. The sound was like a nightmarish apparition out of childhood dreams, howling out its misery.

Then the apparition appeared, pale, shaking, the Vulcan mask of non-emotion unable to hide the great turmoil within.

Leaving brisk instructions for completing the repairs to the computer, Spock of Vulcan commandeered a small ship, invoking his rank as privilege, and was gone.



Akemi Franco paused outside the door to Kate Donar's office and took a deep breath. Their last encounter the day before had been less than friendly and Akemi wanted very much to set things right with her friend. She felt that Kate was in deep trouble emotionally but would not admit it, and Akemi wanted to help. She shivered at the remembered coldness that had overtaken Kate's voice when they had parted. It frightened her in a way she could not have explained to anyone else. It was as if a mask that Kate had kept very carefully in place had slipped and revealed the scarred face underneath. Well, whatever was wrong, she could offer Kate her friendship and a shoulder to cry on if that was what she needed. She hoped that Kate would let her help.

She entered the office to find it empty, not that she was surprised. She knew Kate was totally involved with Kirk's care, almost to the point of obsession. Akemi turned and headed out the door, nearly colliding with the small figure of Ensign Tripp as she entered the office carrying some files.

"Sorry, Lieutenant!" Tripp laughed. "I didn't see you there."

"That's all right, Dorothy. I'm looking for Kate. I suppose she's with Captain Kirk?"

Dorothy's face became serious and she leaned forward until her face was only inches away from Franco's, her large green eyes becoming misty. "Yes ma'am, and it's just so sad."

Franco frowned. "Sad? I don't understand."

"Well, I mean their having been in love and all."

Franco felt a small tingle begin in the small of her back. "In love?"

Ensign Tripp took a step back. "Oh, I thought you knew. I mean, being friends and all. I thought Dr. Donar would have told you about her and the captain having been in love all those years ago and now she won't trust anyone else to take care of him. It's so romantic."

The tingle in Akemi's back became a red alert with all klaxons sounding in her mind.

"Would you like me to go tell Dr. Donar that you're here to see her?" Tripp laid the files on Kate's desk and started back toward the door.

Akemi grabbed her arm. "No! I mean, no thanks. I don't want to bother her. It's nothing important. In fact, don't even tell her I was here. She has so much on her mind and I don't want to add to her problems. Okay?"

Tripp nodded her gray head and smiled. "You're such a good friend, Lieutenant. I hope the doctor knows just how good."

Akemi managed what she hoped passed for a smile and tried not to leave the office on a dead run. She started towards Admiral Ravel's office but stopped in mid-step. He would not listen to her without tangible facts to back her suspicions of Kate. The Admiral had been extremely angry after witnessing Dr. McCoy's disrespectful attitude towards Dr. Donar in the Med-Center and was most likely totally inapproachable on the subject of Kate's competence. She could not go to him. Akemi glanced nervously behind her, almost afraid Kate would be following her. No one was there.

She continued slowly down the hall, unsure of her destination. Franco had several friends here who would be willing to help, but no one that could give her the sort of assistance she needed.

There was only one person who could help. McCoy would not only help but he would understand and believe her. She hoped that McCoy was in his quarters. Somehow, she felt there might not be enough time to track him down.



McCoy had slept in fits and starts through the long night. Images of Kirk, hallucinating, barely able to breathe, kept pulling him out of whatever sleep he managed. Finally, he gave it up as a lost cause, checked with Uhura for any reply from Starfleet, then took a shower and ordered coffee from the food processor provided with the room. He was on his second cup when the door signal sounded.

He glanced at his chronometer, the time was early morning here on base. It was probably Scotty or Uhura coming to give any assistance they could offer.

He did not want to consider the alternative reason someone would be knocking on his door at this hour. News concerning Captain Kirk.

Setting the cup down, he walked to the door, saying "Come" at the same time. Akemi Franco almost knocked him down as she came flying through it. Noting her fearful, distraught expression, McCoy's heart began to pound.

"Lieutenant, what's wrong? Is it about Captain Kirk?"

She nodded. McCoy stared at her pale face and saw what he feared was true. Jim Kirk was dead. He felt a numbness set in, his knees feeling unsteady. The doctor sat down on a nearby chair, forcing himself to breathe. "All right. Tell me what you know, everything, Lieutenant."

Franco stared at him wildly for a moment and McCoy found himself cursing under his breath. If they were going to send him official word of the captain's death, Admiral Ravel should have come instead of this flighty child.

"I'm so glad you're here. There's so little time. You've got to do something. I'll help you in any way that I can."

She paused for breath while McCoy just stared at her.

"What are you talking about?" he demanded, hope starting to flare. "You didn't come to tell me the Captain's dead?"

Franco's blue eyes widened. "Oh no! No, he's not. But he's going to be if something's not done and quickly. It's just that I don't know what to do and that's . . ."

With renewed energy, McCoy stood and grasped both of her shoulders and gave her a small shake. "Calm down and sit down." When she took the small chair he'd just vacated by the desk, he perched himself on the corner of it and smiled encouragingly. "Now then, take three deep breaths and tell me what's going on."

Akemi did as he told her and then began again. "I went to see Kate a few minutes ago. She was in with the captain but I had a most enlightening talk with Ensign Tripp, you know, the nurse?"

McCoy nodded his head. "So?"

"She had a very interesting story to tell me. Actually, she thought I already knew but of course I didn't and . . . "

"Will you please get to the point, Lieutenant?" McCoy tried to keep his voice relatively calm.

"Yes, of course. It's just that I have no proof of anything, you understand, only Kate's been so . . . different. Considering what she told me before and then what Dorothy told me now, I . . . "

"Lieutenant!" This time the calm voice became a decided bellow and he did not care in the least.

"Dorothy, ah Nurse Tripp, was telling me all about Kate and Captain Kirk's love affair."

McCoy sat stunned for a split second as his brain tried to assimilate what Akemi had just said. "Love affair?" He finally managed to squeak out. "Love affair? That's the most ridiculous, preposterous, out and out lie I have ever heard!" By now he was on his feet, pacing. For Donar to make up such a story meant she was covering up something. Everything centered on her obsession with Kirk. An image of Kirk's pale face begging him to stay made McCoy's chest squeeze painfully. He had been concerned with Donar's care, but he had not considered that she could be trying to hurt Kirk deliberately. Jim had tried to tell him the truth and McCoy had not listened. He swung back around to Franco, his voice harsh with self recrimination.

"What else did Dorothy say?"

"Only that it was because of all they had meant to each other that Kate wouldn't let anyone else care for him, that she felt she owed it to him somehow. I was so stunned that it was all I could do to make some excuse and leave. I didn't know who to tell who would understand how serious this is. You do, don't you?"

McCoy's thoughts had been racing, only half listening to the Lieutenant's answer. She was staring at him, her eyes hesitant and watchful as if she did not know what to expect from him. The child was frightened and confused, and needed reassurance. Kirk's life could depend on her assistance.

With that thought, McCoy stopped pacing and reseated himself on the corner of the desk at her side. He held her blue eyes with his own. "Yes, honey, I believe you. You did the right thing by coming here." He smiled, waiting until she gave a weak imitation of his own smile. "Now, you can help by telling me what you know of Dr. Donar. I have the distinct impression that this is upsetting to you because she is also your friend."

Akemi nodded, her eyes brimming with tears. "That's what makes this so hard to understand." She looked down.

McCoy waited, reining in his impatience. Finally, he rested a hand lightly on her shoulder. "I know it must be difficult and I'm sorry. But I need some help if we are to save Captain Kirk. It would help to know something about Dr. Donar. If I can understand what her gain is in this, then I may be able to talk to her."

Franco lifted her head, smiling apologetically. She wiped a solitary tear from her cheek. "I'm not usually like this, you know. Haven't cried since . . . anyway, I'll help any way I can. Exactly what do you want to know about her?"

McCoy gave her a nod of approval. The Lieutenant had been upset when she had arrived, but she was recovering nicely.

"Tell me how long you've been friends, what type of personality she is, and any changes in that personality that you've noticed."

"Kate and I met a few months ago, and have spent a lot of off duty time together. Her personality, well, she's intelligent, has a wickedly sarcastic wit. Has a tremendous respect for life . . . " Franco frowned, "Had I guess. But that was one of the first things I learned about her. I was a patient, extremely ill with a virus and she was my lifeline throughout those frightening days. What's happened that she could change like this? I mean the one person I knew who revered life so highly and now I suspect her of trying to hurt and maybe even kill the captain?"

"I don't know. There are different reasons for mental imbalance, and unfortunately out here in space, it's much easier to lose that balance. If we pin down what the problem is maybe we can help her. Did you notice any changes in her behavior recently?"

"I've tried to remember anything she said that I should have picked up on . . . She started acting a little strange ever since the Enterprise was first mentioned. Something about losing her position to you. And she also has a lot of bitterness about a good friend that Captain Kirk apparently had a relationship with in the Academy and he hurt. She brought it up again when we argued yesterday in her office. That was right after you had talked with her." Akemi stood, frowning at McCoy. "None of this really proves anything. Admiral Ravel would say we were raving like wildmen. But, there's a feeling in the pit of my stomach that says my friend is . . . sick and your friend is in grave danger. And the only way we can get into see if our suspicions are true is to get the Admiral to listen to us."

"The hell with Admiral Ravel," McCoy snapped angrily. "I've waited too long as it is for Ravel or Starfleet or Spock, damn his Vulcan soul, to do something. It's up to you and me honey. Somehow, we have to get her away from Jim so I can get him up to the ship and find out what she's done to him. You're right, it's not real evidence, but darlin', as far as I'm concerned, it's all the evidence I need. I've known Jim for a lot of years and trust me, he'd never met Kate Donar before we got here. I introduced them to each other. For her to claim that they had some kind of affair in order to keep the medical staff from intruding means she's hiding something." McCoy felt a strong foreboding chill run through him. Akemi had given several good reasons for a person on the edge of sanity to rationally decide to take revenge. "There's no reason for such a lie unless she is doing something to Jim that she doesn't want anyone else to know."

Franco turned away from him, her voice breaking, "This is like a bad nightmare. I keep thinking I'm going to wake up soon and everything will be just fine."

McCoy went to her side, letting her lean her head on his shoulder, holding her securely for a moment. He said softly, "Akemi, I haven't given up yet. We have to save Jim Kirk and then we can see about getting your friend the help she needs. Don't blame yourself for not seeing this problem before, it doesn't sound like there was anything for you to see. There could be many causes for her behavior, and we can't discount physical illness as one of those causes. It may be easily corrected." He paused, pulling away to grip her shoulders. "But now, I need your help. We have to get into sickbay. I'll call Mr. Scott on the way, so he'll be standing by with the transporters and on my signal can beam us directly out of here. Thank god, they're back on line."

Franco nodded solemnly.

"Good." McCoy smiled and then went to the desk retrieving first his communicator and then his phaser. "You must be prepared though. No matter what it takes, we must get Jim Kirk out of there."

Akemi frowned, eyeing the weapon he was tucking inside his tunic. "I understand. But you won't hurt her, will you?"

"I hope it doesn't come to that but I will do whatever she forces me to do."

Franco bit her lip. "I'm ready. I may be able to help get her to come into the office and you can overpower her without using the phaser. She still trusts me, I think, at least enough to talk to me if I ask her to."

McCoy nodded. "Good girl. Let's go. I can talk to Scotty on the way and let him know what's going on."

And say a few prayers along the way. It couldn't hurt, McCoy thought to himself. It couldn't hurt.



Kate's office was empty when they arrived but within moments, Ensign Tripp came bustling into the room.

"Lieutenant, Doctor. I'm afraid Captain Kirk isn't up to visitors today."

McCoy carefully kept his back to the wall. A communicator and phaser under one's shirt tended to make quite a bulge.

Akemi spoke up. "We'd really like to see Kate. Could you tell her we're here and we'll only take a few minutes of her time?"

Dorothy looked doubtful but finally nodded. "I'll ask."

McCoy watched her leave and exchanged a bleak smile with Akemi. His gaze was drawn back to the door, worrying, wishing he could simply blaze his way through the walls that blocked his way with Kirk. Until he saw Jim, checked the captain over himself, McCoy only had his worst scenario possibilities running a continuous loop in his imaginings.

Still watching the door, McCoy spoke quietly, almost to himself. "Maybe she'll cooperate. I hope we'll be able to reason with her. I'd hate to have to use force but I will if that's what it takes. She must be mad as a hatter."

Akemi sighed. "I don't want to believe that, Doctor."

Within just a few minutes, Kate entered the office. Smiling benignly, she moved behind the desk and seated herself. Folding her hands demurely in front of her, she looked from Akemi to McCoy.

"Well, what can I do for you both?" Her voice was calm and it made the hair on the back of McCoy's neck stand on end.

"You can relinquish Captain Kirk to my care and turn yourself over to the base psychiatrist for treatment," he said softly.

Her laugh was short and bitter. "I have no intention of doing either, Doctor. And I must say your obsession with my treating Captain Kirk would seem to qualify you for psychiatric care. Wouldn't you agree, Akemi?"

A flash of pain crossed Akemi's face. McCoy wondered if she had the strength to stand up to her friend. Donar would use her weakness in any way she could.

"No, Kate, I don't agree. I think Dr. McCoy is right. You need help. Please listen to him."

McCoy watched Donar carefully, the signs of anger at Franco's response were evident in her body posture and hands, but she very carefully kept any of it from her face. Instead she cocked her head slightly, her dark eyes holding Franco's captive.

"Akemi, you can't be serious. What has Dr. McCoy told you? I know I've been a little short with you, but I can't believe you'd say I'm crazy." The black eyes were almost liquid, the expression of hurt on her face believable.

Franco closed her eyes, unable to hide her own anguish. McCoy watched her anxiously. It would be difficult to confront a friend with this. If Akemi gave in now, McCoy would find himself escorted out by security.

The Lieutenant straightened, and he saw a new look of determination on her face. There was a strength in her that he had not suspected. McCoy allowed himself to relax. A little.

"Kate," she began. "We've been short with one another before, but not like this. You've exhibited behavior that I can't explain. You're not crazy and neither of us said that, but you do need help. And so does Captain Kirk."

Donar's eyes narrowed in anger. She allowed one scathing look at Akemi. Just as quickly, she composed her face, the same enigmatic smile reappearing. She was good, he had to give her that, damn good.

"Well, it seems you've chosen sides, Lieutenant. It makes things much easier."

The statement was part of the pattern McCoy was beginning to piece together. Her paranoia had reached a state where soon she would no longer be able to function. But that breakdown would come days too late for Kirk. At least he had some idea of how to talk to her.

Donar had turned to face McCoy, dismissing Akemi as if she did not exist. Her coldness was a palpable thing.

"Did you think you could just walk in here, make you demands, and I'd turn my patient over to you? Well, you were wrong, Doctor." Her voice dropped to a low hiss. "Now, get out of here while you still can."

McCoy considered simply using the phaser, but one look at Franco's stricken face made him try once more to reason with Donar.

"Kate, I didn't mean for you to think I was trying to take your patient away from you. I've admired your work for years. To have the chance to observe your techniques with treating Captain Kirk would help me tremendously. Would you show me?"

Donar's face was a study of suspicion and confusion. She half rose, her eyes flickering towards the door and back to McCoy. He kept his face composed, knowing that if she saw even the faintest bit of hope, there would be none for Jim.

Then Donar glanced back at Akemi, and saw her tortured face, a single tear escaping down the young girl's cheek. Kate's face twisted with rage. "Pity? Pity for me, Akemi?" Cold, dark eyes raked McCoy. "It isn't going to work, doctor. That was the last chance you had. Now, leave."

McCoy reached behind his back and pulled out the phaser. He had given her enough chances. Jim needed him and it was more obvious each second he observed her that Kate Donar was not sane.

He pointed the phaser at her. "I'm talking the captain back to the ship — with your cooperation or without it. I won't let you stop me this time."

"No, Dr. McCoy, I think not." The sound of Ravel's voice behind McCoy caused him to start. Turning, he saw the Admiral, a red-shirted security man on either side, all with drawn phasers.

The doctor did not relinquish his phaser, but dropped his arm to his side. He launched into an explanation, knowing he would only have one brief opportunity. "Admiral, I know how this looks, but you have to listen to me. Captain Kirk is in grave danger. I must see him now."

Ravel shook his head, staring at McCoy. The doctor watched in sickening disbelief as the Admiral gave him the same look that McCoy had just given to Donar. Ravel thought he was insane.

"Doctor, you really must have lost your mind to make such an accusation. Dr. Donar is the finest physician we've ever had on this base." He turned to look at Donar, his smile for her full of concern and blind love. "Kate, you were right to call me. Are you all right?"

Donar had recovered from her near loss of control with McCoy. She pulled her eyes from the lowered phaser in McCoy's hand, presenting just the right amount of fear and relief. "I'm just glad you got here when you did. I hated to call for you, but I see now I was right." Her voice was reasonable, calm. Standing, she lowered her voice confidentially even though McCoy could still hear every word. "Dr. McCoy obviously needs help, but right now I don't have time to take care of him. I need to get back to my patient."

Ravel motioned toward McCoy. "Doctor, place your phaser on the desk. I must ask you to come with me quietly."

With all his hopes dashed, McCoy resisted complying. Maybe he could bluff them; take Kate as hostage and demand to see Kirk. It was a scheme that Jim would pull in a second to save him. The difference was Jim Kirk would pull it off successfully while the doctor would probably end up in the brig, failing his friend completely.

McCoy's shoulders drooped in defeat as he lay the phaser on Kate's desk. Should have blasted the damn doors down earlier, at least he could have seen Jim before they carted him away. Donar met his eyes evenly, her black ones shining malevolently, the triumphant smile she wore caused him to shiver with impotent rage. How could Ravel be so damn blind?

He turned to follow the security guard, but Franco caught his arm, squeezing it tightly. "Wait, Doctor." She squeezed again and he frowned, wondering if she was trying to get some message across. Puzzled, he stopped, frowning.

"Admiral Ravel, you must believe Dr. McCoy. He's telling the truth."

McCoy watched the Admiral stare at Akemi in surprise. He shook his head. Ravel was not going to listen, and if he did, Donar was good enough to talk herself out of any box they put her in. Franco was doing no one any favors, especially herself, by throwing herself into the antimatter pile with him.

Gazing past Ravel, he froze, seeing what Akemi was trying to tell him. The calvary was coming over the hill. Spock. He caught just a glimpse as the Vulcan slipped unnoticed into Kirk's room. Several unanswered questions rapidly ran through his mind. When the hell had he arrived? Then he allowed a mental shake, keeping the smile that was threatening totally hidden. He should have known Spock would show up when Jim needed him the most. A small flame of hope lifted his spirits. He gave a silent prayer, thanking the heavens for pointed ears.

McCoy brought his attention back to Donar abruptly. They had to delay Ravel and keep Dr. Donar away from Kirk long enough to give Spock time to rescue Jim. Not an easy task, about as easy as him remaining calmly and quietly here while Jim was suffering, maybe dying.

Lt. Franco still held tightly to his arm and McCoy could feel her trembling. She continued, "Admiral, I realize how awful this sounds. Impossible, too. I still don't understand why . . . but I have reason to believe Dr. Donar is . . . hurting the captain for personal reasons."

Donar scoffed. "Akemi, how can you say that? John, I really must go, I can't listen to this nonsense."

Ravel shook his head. "Wait." He fixed Franco with a calculating stare. "Lieutenant, I've never known you to be so irrational. You've confused me once or twice, perplexed me several times but nothing like this. And that is the only reason I'm listening now. You'd better start making sense soon. I was under the impression you were Dr. Donar's friend."

"I am." Akemi looked down, wiping away tears, then turned back to Ravel, her face composed but sober. No, sad, so sad, McCoy thought. But when she spoke, her voice was firm, no hesitation present. "I'm convinced that Dr. Donar is trying to kill the Captain."

McCoy watched Donar's face tighten in anger, her hands clenched into fists at her sides. They were rapidly pushing her over the edge; she could be dangerous to more than the captain.

"You have proof of this?" Ravel snapped.

Franco took a deep breath. "A few weeks ago, Kate told me about a good friend of hers whom Captain Kirk hurt several years ago when he broke off the romance. Kate sounded bitter but at the . . ."

"Admiral," Donar interrupted, her black eyes flashing openly. "Do you really intend to listen to this personal vendetta? I don't know what I've done to cause Akemi to hate me so, but right now I must see to Captain Kirk. I've been away much longer than I planned."

McCoy's heart jumped to his throat as she strode to the door, obviously intending to return to Kirk. And find Spock. He could envision Franco, Spock and himself all in the brig.

Ravel stopped her just as the door flew open. "Dr. Donar, I apologize, but you must remain while I hear Lt. Franco. I don't understand what is happening here, but I intend to get to the bottom of this. You can send one of your staff to attend to the captain."

"I can't, John. I'm serious. Captain Kirk is in critical condition. I've got to get back to him."

There was a desperate note to her voice McCoy had not noticed before, but Ravel did not seem to hear it. Watching her composure, McCoy could almost begin to doubt his own accusations.

Ravel nodded. "I know. Nevertheless, Captain Kirk is the point of all this. I will hear the Lieutenant out."

McCoy felt sweat beading his forehead. He took back all the nasty thoughts he had had about Ravel before. At least he was listening. As Akemi began reciting the story that Ensign Tripp had told her earlier, McCoy bit his lip, his mind turning to Spock and Jim. Had the calvary arrived in time?



Spock had seen one doctor on his way through the MedCenter to the Intensive Care Unit where he had left his captain. The officer had been startled at his presence, but had said nothing. Instead he had rapidly gone in the opposite direction. Odd behavior which only added to Spock's alarm. The situation Mr. Scott had described to him when he had contacted the Enterprise while en route to the Starbase had only served to strengthen his resolve to reach Kirk before it was too late.

The Vulcan overrode the computer lock on the door, taking seven point two seconds to do so, and in that brief time, his mind illogically pulled up a memory of Kirk telling him he could be a master thief. The captain had laughed and gone on to describe several of his talents that would be extremely useful to the profession.

Spock slipped quietly into the room. The pale, drawn figure on the bed was a shock, replacing the vivid picture in his mind of a few seconds before.

"Jim!" He strode to his side, flinching at the open glazed eyes.

"Commander!" Another voice intruded, and Spock turned to confront a short, black haired nurse approaching him from across the room. "Commander, you're not allowed in here. I must ask you to leave immediately."

Spock assessed her, deciding whether he could afford the time to reason with her. She had pouty lips, and determined dark eyes. The Vulcan glanced back at Kirk and then acknowledged her with a nod. "I was unaware of the restriction."

Spock walked past her, turned back and reached out. The nurse slumped, unconscious from his neck pinch. Spock caught her as she fell, placed her in a nearby chair and returned to Kirk's side. He would not have much time.

"Jim, can you hear me?"

Nothing. His eyes raked the life panel above Kirk's head, the readings all in the critical zone. And yet no alarms were sounding, no frantic activity by the medical staff to attempt to save him. Even with his limited medical knowledge, Spock could see the captain could only survive a few more minutes.

His breathing was almost too shallow to see. Spock released the restraints and considered having Scott beam him directly to sickbay on the Enterprise. But, the numerous tubes connected to Kirk might

kill him by their sudden removal. He had to have McCoy. And to get him, Spock needed proof Kirk's condition was a direct result of Dr. Donar's interference.

Aware of the need to hurry, Spock could not resist reaching down to smooth Kirk's hair. His hand slid down to Kirk's temple and Spock closed his eyes, providing the momentary easing of discomfort as he had for Kirk in the garden before he had collapsed. It was not an invasion of the mind and he did not touch Kirk's thoughts, although he was strongly tempted.

Kirk's eyes closed, his features relaxing. Spock withdrew his hand, noting the face immediately resumed its drawn, pinched appearance. He needed information. Spock gripped Kirk's shoulder.

"Captain. Captain Kirk!" He squeezed lightly, and an infinitesimal grimace crossed the captain's face. Spock squeezed harder, "Captain . . . Jim, I need you to answer me. Open your eyes."

The hazel eyes opened, the frown deepening. After an eternity of seconds, he focused on Spock.

"Spock." The Vulcan read the formed word clearly, although no sound accompanied Kirk's efforts to speak.

"Jim, I must know, has Dr. Donar hurt you?"

Kirk's eyes were losing their focus, and seeing the glazed expression, Spock knew the captain had not heard him.

"Jim, listen to me." Spock gripped both shoulders firmly, ignoring the clear grimace of pain that flashed across Kirk's face. "Dr. Donar will return soon. I need your . . ."

Something reached the captain. Kirk was looking at Spock, eyes wide, panic surfacing. "No." Again he mouthed the word, but not even a whisper of sound came with it. It was possible he did not have the strength, but the Vulcan doubted that was the explanation.

Ripples of pain were crossing Kirk's face. The more conscious he became, the more pain he was experiencing. Spock watched as the tense expression grew slack and Kirk once more slipped into his dark world. Within minutes, the Vulcan knew he would no longer be a part of this world. It seemed for a moment the darkness that was taking Kirk away from him, surrounding his own soul.

Spock placed both hands near Kirk's face, spreading his fingers. Almost touching, he hesitated, battling the long years of Vulcan training. Jim had not given him permission to meld, and this would require him to reach deep into Kirk's thoughts. It was not his right to choose this action.

His hands fell limply back to Kirk's shoulders. Kirk was dying, only Spock could save him. This action was logical. Not ethical, but he would deal with the consequences of that later. All that mattered now was Kirk's life.

He positioned his hands lightly on Kirk's motionless features. He would share Kirk's thoughts, but Jim's untrained mind would not only share his thoughts, but probably violate his own mind. It would be an intrusion unlike any other he had experienced. Was he prepared for that?

Something in Spock's heart said yes, ignoring all the arguments his mind provided. A door long closed opened inside him. Time and more than time to let in the light.

He pressed his fingers against the warm skin, closing his own eyes. "My mind to thy mind."

Spock slipped into Kirk's mind and was immediately deluged with acute agonizing pain. This was what Kirk was experiencing each time he'd been forced to surface to this uppermost level. He rapidly found a way around it and sifted through several levels searching for some sign of Kirk's essence.

Spock passed through sections that resembled a chamber of horrors. Donar appeared in various almost unrecognizable forms, her victims lying murdered at her feet. He passed through what had to be hallucinations, and experienced Kirk's uncomprehending fear. Scene upon scene of Donar taunting, teasing and torturing Kirk were mixed in with the dark nightmarish visions. It was nearly impossible for him to distinguish between the real events and the drug-induced hallucinations. Spock pulled himself away from the visions but was stopped by a dream sequence involving McCoy. He watched from Kirk's eyes, McCoy's battle with Donar and his removal at phaser point from Kirk's side. Then Donar leaned over him, her eyes glowing with madness, nails biting into his arms . . . and the pain . . . a great wage welled up in his being, control possible only because of his strong need to help Kirk.

Spock hesitated before continuing. He already had enough evidence here for his own proof of Donar's misconduct, he could leave immediately to confront and dispose of Donar. But in the time it would take to release Kirk from Donar's care, he sensed they would lose Kirk. He was sinking rapidly, the vital signs continuing to decline. Spock needed to find Kirk first, reassure him that Donar would not be allowed near him again. That he was safe now.

'Spock?' A brief flash of bright colors appeared and was as quickly gone.

Spock remained where he was, motionless. Kirk knew he was here, but was probably confused and afraid due to Donar's manipulations. He would have to gain his confidence.

'Jim, it is Spock. I need your help, to free you from Dr. Donar.'

Again Spock felt himself touched by the light.

'How did you get here?'

Spock chose not to speak of the mind meld, not sure if Kirk understood how they were communicating. Now was not the time to present this aspect of telepathy to a human. **'I heard you call out to me. You were in pain, and asked me to help you.'**

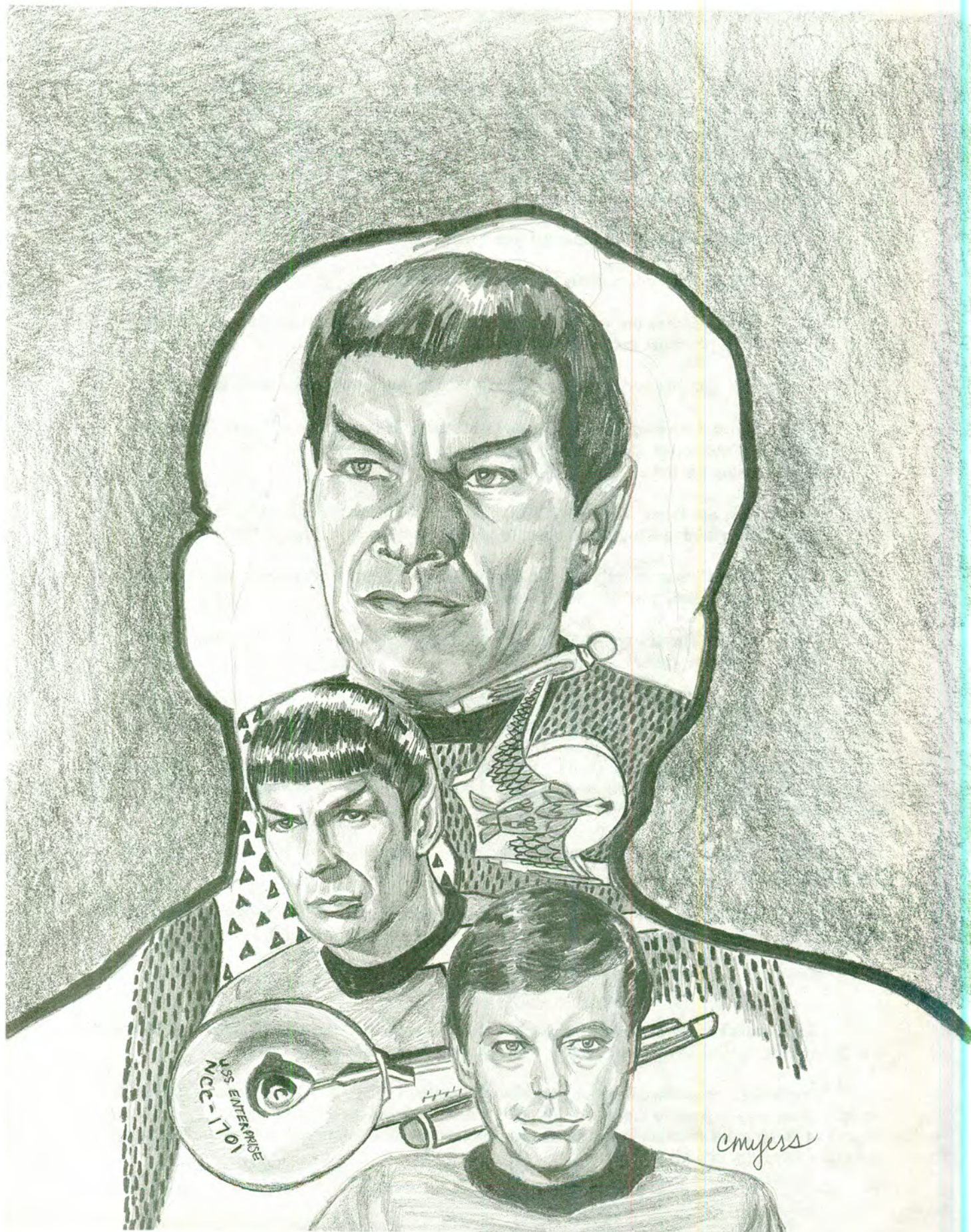
Now the light dimly stood beneath him. Patiently, Spock waited.

'What took you so long to come?' Kirk demanded.

'I was on Pollux 3, repairing their computer system.'

The shifting colors danced closer. **'You heard me call to you on Pollux 3?'** Wonder colored the thought.

The dancing colors enveloped Spock, and he was deluged with emotions and tendrils of thoughts. At first, it was frightening and he fought against the sharing. Then the pulsing warm glow blended within and Spock found himself being guided by Kirk.



Spock could not be sure how long they remained here, and he reluctantly pulled back from the love and acceptance that was Kirk's essence. Images had flowed continuously between them, a sharing of life and passion that could have taken hours. Spock felt a brief panic, knowing that Kirk was still in grave danger. They had shared much of each other, but Kirk had blocked all thoughts of the present pain he was experiencing far away.

'Jim, I must go. I must get you to safety.'

The shifting colors at his side shrank suddenly. Faintly, he heard, **'Leaving?'**

Spock reached out with his own essence as Kirk had before to him, surrounding him securely. **'I must get you to safety. I will come back.'**

The light reached back, almost sadly. **'But you won't come back here.'**

Spock felt a moment of complete satisfaction. He should have known Jim would understand and accept this facet of Vulcan culture. He was not afraid of the mind meld, he was asking for more.

'No, not here. Not now. Jim, you must wait for me.' He reached for Kirk again, strengthening the meld in order to give the weakening human his strength.

The colors grew brighter and then withdrew. Spock asked as the colors began to disappear. **'Jim, you will wait for me?'**

'Yes,' The answer was faint. The shimmering colors faded completely. **'Will there be another time?'**

Spock smiled, hoping wherever Kirk had gone he could see his pleasure. **'Yes,'** he promised. And knew he was promising Kirk something more than his chance for life.

He slipped out of the meld gently. Four minutes, twenty seconds had elapsed. The nurse still remained slumped in her chair. No one had entered the room. Spock drew a breath, his only allowance to the strain the meld had caused.

Kirk still lay deathly still, his eyes partly closed and glazed. His lips were tinged with blue. There was very little time.

"Jim, I will return. Wait for me." Resolutely, Spock headed for Dr. Donar's office, his anger under control, but not totally sublimated. It was time to punish the tormentor.



"Lieutenant Franco, none of what you have told me is proof in the least of the serious accusations you are making against Dr. Donar," Ravel was saying as Spock entered the room.

The Vulcan experienced a strange, twisted sensation in the pit of his stomach. It was an almost overpowering urge to bend to the will of his ancient warrior impulses and destroy Donar. He had never wanted anything quite so much in his life though his rational mind confirmed the impossibility. He had to force a calmness into his voice.

"Admiral, I believe I can furnish you with that proof."

Ravel turned in surprise. "Commander Spock, what are you doing here? I sent you to Pollux Three."

"I left the mission in quite good hands and under control, Admiral. There will be no famine, I assure you."

Spock met McCoy's eyes and for a moment, he shared the burden of fear that the doctor had been carrying alone. The Vulcan turned to Dr. Donar but his words were for all the others.

"I have the proof you are looking for, Admiral. Proof that Dr. Donar has been attempting to kill Captain Kirk the entire time she has been in charge of his care. She has given him drugs that prevented him from recovering and has so distorted the readings by means of other devices so as to make it appear that he was being treated correctly. Finally, she has injected him with a drug of her own creation that is destroying all muscle tissue in his body, including his heart."

Donar's voice again was low and her face was almost twisted in hatred. "You are as crazy as Dr. McCoy. There is no way you could . . ." She stopped as if realizing that she had almost betrayed herself.

She laughed then and Spock could see from the faces of the others in the room that the madness she had been trying to hide was now becoming apparent to all of them. "You're lying. He couldn't have told you anything. I saw to that. I gave him enough Mithproxin to be sure he couldn't say . . ." Her voice faded away as she looked around the room and realized what she was saying. Before anyone could react, Kate picked up McCoy's phaser from the desk top and drew Akemi in front of her.

"Tell me how you knew," she spat the words at him.

"Have you heard of the Vulcan mind meld, Doctor?" He heard McCoy's deep intake of breath but did not take his eyes from Donar.

"A mind meld? That's not acceptable proof. John, he's lying. You don't believe this hocus-pocus nonsense, do you?"

Ravel, white faced, took a step towards Donar. He held a shaking hand towards her. "You just admitted it, Kate. Why? Why would you do such a terrible thing?"

She sneered as she turned to McCoy. "To pay him back for what he did to me, what he cheated me out of. I was to be CMO on the Enterprise but he took it away from me, took what was mind. Well, now I'm taking something he cares about — his precious Captain Kirk."

The color drained from McCoy's face. Often at odds with the illogical doctor, Spock knew his respect of life was so great, he would be horrified at the thought he was the reason for someone else's suffering. Especially Jim Kirk's.

This had to end. Spock moved to stand in front of Donar, only inches away from the hand holding the phaser.

"Dr. Donar, look at me. I am a Vulcan. Vulcans are incapable of lying, do you know that?" She nodded and he looked deep into her eyes, knowing that more than one life depended on her believing him.

"I was assigned to the Enterprise under Captain Pike and was still aboard when Captain Kirk was sent to replace him. The CMO at that time was elderly and decided to retire from active service. When he made that decision, Captain Kirk requested Starfleet assign Dr. McCoy as his CMO. It was Captain Kirk's decision, not Dr. McCoy's. He took nothing from you because it never belonged to you."

Spock watched as the reality of his words began to penetrate the madness that was Kate Donar's mind. A dawning horror fought with grief on her face. She was rational now, and could be reasoned with, Spock glanced back at McCoy, needing his psychological skill.

Donar pushed Akemi forward suddenly into Spock's arms. "What have I done? Akemi, what have I don't?" She cried, and before anyone could react, Donar turned the phaser on herself, and ended the torment her life had become. Horribly, she disappeared, a cry of agony echoing after her.

Akemi's scream echoed in the room. "No! Kate! No!"

Spock was forced to steady Franco, easing the now sobbing girl into a chair. McCoy's face, even in his rage at Kate, reflected his shocked horror at the waste of life. He stared at the empty spot that had been Kate Donar for one brief moment before meeting Spock's dark eyes.

As with one accord, they both turned and were running through the door. They had only moments left to save Kirk's life. Spock followed McCoy into the room where he had left Jim such a very short time ago, not certain what they would find.

McCoy bent over Kirk, his own scanner in his hand. "Can't trust what she did to those readings."

Spock watched McCoy's face as he took a scan and then another. "Life signs are minimal, blood pressure is barely registering. No voluntary response. Damn, I need to know what she gave him, to counteract it. A stimulant could kill him by enhancing its action, the muscle damage is so extensive. I have to know what she gave him." He looked up at Spock. "It's possible Donar kept records of her formulas, she seemed awfully damn proud of what she had done." McCoy's eyes blazed with anger. He snapped, "See if she kept any of it on the computer. Don't waste time breaking into her code, we don't have time. Get Ravel to help, he owes us."

Spock nodded and went to the computer at the end of the room. The nurse he had put to sleep earlier was still slumped in the chair in front of it and he carefully pushed her to the side.

"What happened to her?" McCoy asked. Spock caught only a glimpse of the doctor's puzzled look. He was already bending back over Kirk.

"She is unhurt. She should regain consciousness within the hour."

McCoy grunted. Spock turned his attention back to the computer, ignoring the grumbling coming from across the room. He put aside all thoughts of what the consequences would be if he could not do as McCoy asked. There was no room in this equation for error.



Kirk first became aware of a lessening of pain. He tried to remain very still, almost afraid that movement would begin the onslaught once more. Then, breathing became somewhat easier and part of his mind assimilated that fact and was grateful. He began to hear voices, familiar voices, beloved voices

and the darkness that had enveloped him lessened until he could finally open his eyes. McCoy was standing beside his bed, a wide smile on his face.

"Well, it's about time you decided to join the living, Jimboy."

Kirk tried a response but his mouth was dry and besides, wisecracks were just a little beyond him for the moment.

McCoy stepped back and he could see Spock standing behind him and Lt. Franco as well.

"I invited them to be here to watch you wake up since they had as much to do with saving you as I did."

Lt. Franco smiled. "We're very glad you're doing so much better, Captain. I have a grand celebration planned for your recovery."

Kirk groaned, rolling his eyes. The fleeting smile on Franco's face faded quickly.

Memory returned to him with a resounding crash. He scanned the room, relaxing when he recognized where he was. "Enterprise?" He could not help asking.

"Yes, Jim. Lt. Franco and Scotty managed to have the repairs completed to this section so I could treat you here."

There was something McCoy was not saying. Some issue he was skirting around. He glanced at Franco again, now noticing the red, puffy eyes, despite her bright smile. "Donar?" He managed to rasp out the word, his throat growing dryer and scratchier by the minute.

McCoy looked at Franco for a moment, then back to Kirk. "Dr. Donar killed herself when confronted with what she had done to you. We didn't expect it, and couldn't prevent it. And we almost lost you because Donar was the only one who knew exactly what she'd done to you. If it hadn't been for Spock unlocking the code on her computer entry, I don't think you would have made it, Jim."

Donar was dead. Kirk felt relief, relaxing even more as the knowledge sank in that he was safe from her forever. Glancing up, he caught Franco's grief-ridden eyes and was appalled at his response to Donar's death. He said softly, "I'm sorry she died."

Franco nodded wordlessly, tears slipping down her cheeks.

McCoy put his arm around her. "Well, my dear, I think it's time we go find something to eat. I, for one, am going to have the biggest steak dinner I can find on this base and since Mr. Spock does not eat meat, I will leave him here to tend the captain. That all right with you, Spock?"

"Dr. McCoy, I assure you I would much prefer remaining here with the captain to watching you devour the flesh of some defenseless animal, how ever well cooked."

McCoy grinned. He placed a hand on Kirk's arm, peering up at his life sign panel. The captain didn't miss the haggard lines and wondered how many hours McCoy had been at his side.

A hypo hissed somewhere but Kirk couldn't feel it. He wondered vaguely if he was paralyzed, but the thought flittered away without any concern attached to it. He smiled, feeling very relaxed.

"That's it Jim. You go back to sleep."

He struggled to remain alert. Something he needed to know. "How long, Bones?"

McCoy wavered in front of his eyes. A frown floated into his vision. "You mean recovery time?"

McCoy's voice seemed to come from a distance. His eyes slid shut. "Yesss, command . . ."

McCoy must have leaned close to his ear. "Two weeks minimum, don't worry about your command. Ravel is in so much hot water because of Donar, he's bending over backwards to help us. Now, go to sleep."

It was an effort to speak. "Promised me a dance, remember?"

From far away, he heard McCoy ask, "Who me?" Then a soft wistful laugh that was Franco's.

He drifted for a while, safe, free of pain. Weighed down by cotton, he smiled at the difference it made that his arms were not tied to the bed, even if he did not have the energy to move them. Consciousness faded and then the dreams came. Disturbing, real. Kirk twisted, trying to free himself while Donar leaned over him, laughing maniacally.

"Jim."

Now she was using Spock's voice. Kirk pulled one of his hands free of the restraint, grasping the side of the bed in a desperate attempt to escape.

Her hand caught his, pulling him back. Gently he was eased back on a supportive cushion. The dark form bending over him straightened, still holding his hand firmly. The surrealistic dream wavered and cleared. Spock, not Donar, stood calmly at his side.

"Spock." His heart was still pounding wildly and he gripped tightly the hand holding his own. Wisps of the nightmare still surrounded him, making it difficult to distinguish where the dream ended and reality began.

"Captain."

The quiet formality was the reassurance Kirk needed. Kirk studied the blurring features above him with fondness. "I thought you were Dr. Donar."

"Dr. McCoy explained that due to the trauma of the last forty-eight hours and the traces of drugs she used still in your system, you would experience disturbing dreams and possibly some disorientation. It is temporary and will soon pass."

He frowned, "How soon?"

Spock released his hand, and reached for something Kirk couldn't see. "The good doctor was vague on the time, proving once again that he operates on a system of guesswork rather than exact science." He paused, his brown eyes soft as they met his. "Are you thirsty?"

Kirk nodded, surprised when Spock, rather than call for a nurse, lifted him and repositioned his pillows so that he was sitting partially upright. The Vulcan helped him to drink, the cool liquid soothing his dry throat.

"Thank you, nurse."

Spock nodded with quiet dignity, reaching forward to remove the pillows behind Kirk's back.

"Wait, Spock." At the Vulcan's questioning glance, Kirk continued, "I would rather talk right now. Why don't you sit down."

There was hesitation in his movements, and Kirk thought he detected a certain wariness in Spock's look. "For a few moments only, Captain. You need rest."

Irritated, Kirk snapped, "Do you have any idea how tired I am of hearing that?"

"Nevertheless, it is true, and illogical to deny it."

Kirk sighed. "Conceded. However, a current report on the ship won't hurt me. I'll just lay here quietly and listen."

The Vulcan seemed to relax slightly, although he remained standing at his side. "Auxiliary is now open and functional. Navigation is back on line as is communications. Mr. Scott is not satisfied with the progress of repairs to the impulse engines and is behind our estimated repair schedule. All other departments are preparing for an A1 systems check in thirty-two hours and I anticipate only minor adjustments will be needed. We will be space-worthy in an estimated fifty-six hours, depending on Mr. Scott's satisfaction with the engines. Admiral Ravel has arranged for the Enterprise to have a test run before giving us our next orders, thus allowing you time to take command before we ship out."

"Sounds like you and Scotty don't get any shore leave though."

"Base maintenance is doing the work. We have had minimal involvement."

"Good." Kirk eyes closed wearily. He was aware of muted pain with each intake of air. He was tired, but there was something he needed to talk about with Spock. Now, not later.

Hands wrapped around his shoulders, lifting him. "You are tiring yourself. It is time to rest."

Kirk opened his eyes, stalling, "Can I have another drink?"

"Yes." Spock picked up the glass. "Then you will rest."

Greedily, Kirk drank as the Vulcan held the glass for him. With effort, he forced his fumbling hands up to take the glass from Spock. The brown eyes flickered up to Kirk's face, his lips thinning in disapproval.

"Spock, I don't remember everything that happened while I was in Donar's care, I don't think I want to. But I do remember the mind meld. Clearly. I want to thank you."

Spock straightened, leaving Kirk to hold his own glass. The brown eyes that held his were troubled. "I regret the invasion of your mind. I saw no other alternative to obtain the information needed to stop Dr. Donar."

"Spock, I don't regret it. You saved my life."

"On Vulcan, the mind meld is undertaken with great care, only between two trained telepaths, or under the guidance of a healer. To invade your mind as I did, without your consent, is unthinkable among my people. I endangered you and invaded your privacy."

Something settled into place in Kirk's mind. It was as if some residue of Spock's meld had been left to guide him in this conversation.

"Spock, I have never experienced such belonging . . . the depth of understanding . . . the joy as our . . ." Kirk paused, meeting Spock's intense look evenly. "Our souls touched. I know you in a way that no one else ever will." His voice dropped to a whisper as he remembered again with awe the sensations he had felt when Spock had come to save him.

Spock's nod was brief. "Yes, you experienced the positive aspects of the meld. It could have easily been very negative and dangerous. It could have left both you and I insane."

"But it didn't, Spock." The black eyes had become distant, unreadable. "Was it so uncomfortable for you, Spock? Did it harm you in some way?"

"No, Captain, there was no injury. I, also, experienced . . . the positive aspects." Spock looked down, seeming almost embarrassed.

Reassured, Kirk hid a smile as the Vulcan busied himself by removing Kirk's glass and repositioning him back down on the bed. This friendship was going to be interesting indeed. The import of that word suddenly hit him. Yes, they were friends. Friends who would have to work very hard to find a command ground but that would come in time.

He gasped as his heart shuddered with a spasm of pain. "Damn," he grated out, his eyes tightly closed, tensely waiting for it to ease.

Voices whispered, and a hypo hissed again in his arm. Kirk fought to breathe, grateful when Spock unclenched his hand from the bed linen and clasped it firmly. He held onto the solid security as the agony in his chest slowly eased. Kirk began to drift away again on cottony clouds. He was so weary. But there was something else . . .

"Spock?" He tried to lift his head, blearily making out the Vulcan's form at his side.

"Here, Captain. You must rest."

He had to tell Spock now, make him understand. "I felt as if I had lost a potential friend in the Romulan Captain." He paused to catch his breath, relieved when Spock waited patiently for him to continue. "He said that in a different reality, we could have been friends." His eyes slid closed and he fought to keep them open. Lifting his hand, he searched for Spock's hand on the side of the bed. "I'd like to think . . . that I've found one in this reality in you."

The warmer than human hand was placed over his again. Kirk waited, fighting the steady pull of sleep.

And his answer came in measured quiet words from the Vulcan at his side.

"A friend is a precious commodity in any reality, Captain. The Romulan's loss is my gain."

